TOWNS, ROYAL

Pamela Morton Interview
34

Royal Towns, Index to Interview

000 Elsie Stackler
nicknames of WO _____ kids (not derogatory names)
3:45 10 minutes of nicknames
Arabians were merchants, linens, haberdashery
Royal called "George Washington Sugar Doughnuts"

015 going thru bulletin articles, letters
3:55

143 change names--Slavs took off "ich"
Charlie Silva changed to Forest
Merkovich to Merko
because of discrim
Irish names changed

175 how Royal T got his promotion in fire dept. by doing survey of black firefighters
last black appt'd in fire dept. for 15 yrs 1927
rookie for 15 yrs

215 names--ethnic goes thru list

225 St. Joseph's Inst got jobs w/RR
Father Mack looked out for them

335 W of Mrk Boys Club excluded blacks

340 the day Royal was born, dif names...WO must be heaven
excluded foreign-born, Asians, had to be native-born, parents couldn't belong
W of Mrkt Boys Club & Oldtimer's Reunion
mbrs overlapper
W of M By's Club--lots of businessmen
Oldtimer's--social function
Re-Union to give recognition due
All extra money given to charities

440 hot waters, key route had own elect(ricity), washed boilers out
34th & Wood

descrip of photos
American House--rooming house, SP men, 7th & Wood

560 End

Tape 2, Side 1

000 the "shoots"

Transcribed verbatim in: Royal Edward Towns, Robert Parks Anthropological Studies Center, 19-

010 black harboring refugees for 1906 quake & fire
black section in SF destroyed
memory of quake, bricks fell fr chimney
Baptist Church at _____ & _____ fell apart
refugees came by ferry then train on 7th

045 Crick Route, 5¢ ferry for horse & wagon at 1st & Brdwy

050 everybody came over w/in a couple of days
blck section of SF So of Mission btwn 3rd & Bay
blcks lived out nr the Presidio nr their wk

075 most blcks came fr SF quake to O
O not much until then
were blcks in O previously, wd for pullman
blcks ran salloons--most blck busness were saloons, poolrms

095 _____ saloons, dif nationalities had their own (he names)

120 no racial fights in WO
SP brought Irish into O
& blcks, Greeks, Portuguese
SP great impact
father Mack resp for getting them jobs as engineers

140 Slavonians came in 1904-5 & many aftr quake

150 Dagos vs. Italians (had the busness) (just came over)
Portuguese vs. Portugee
Colored vs. Niggers--2 dif classes
Arabians--door to door then get stores
(names dif ethnic businesses)

190 livery stables

220 blcks got jobs according to color, associate w/other groups
intermarriage

260 do anything to get a job
"don't tell them what you are"

295 13th St. btwn Sutter & Kirkham
tin can alley because Its were scavengers

320 prob's btwn ltr blcks & dkr blcks over jobs
most important thing to get a job

334 swimming in estuary
after 1914 blcks brought to wk in shiphards
they were laborers fr Texas, LA, Alabama
they segregated themselves & looked down on other blcks (estab)
for mixing
def swimming places
no ~~cold~~ color line--when he was young

370 Royal walking w/father, mother
wht kid blck kid

375 1860 grave at Mt. View (1874) of Royal's family
grave moved fr older cemetary 18th (16th) & Alice
other side of Scott family--Placerville, CA gold country

415 grandfather didn't share experience
because of "manners"

480 his father--looks Mexican, Indian, could speak Spanish
went to Chinatown--descrip of Chinese
father speaks Chinese--learned while steward at Occidental Club--when Big 4 were. Learned Chinese--fed Chinese who worked on transcon RR

666 End Tape 2, Side 2

000

045 mother's family in O before 1860
father's family in O before 1880's
pic of Lincoln School 1881
father lived in SF 1865--steward at Occidental Club
father worked at transcon

060 mother saw 1st transcon come into town
father--pullman porter
pullman palace car & cooked

070 1870's--dad steward on steamer, Amelia
running btwn Suisun & SF
1874--transcom came into Sacramento fr there to O & SF by boat
later bridged river & went to Suisun
couldn't go further because of marshland there

095 family in SF in late 1870's then moved to O (Town's side)
1898--Royal's parents married both for 2nd time
each had children fr other marriages (mother's 1st husband steward on stmr that blew up in Vallejo--he was killed)

105 great grandmother died in 1895 at 100 yrs old
was a nurse, has picture
Grandma Neal

125 father paralysed when Royal was 8
fr steamer accident

130 brother ran barbership at 10th & Broadway

133 parents married in O, lived at 5th & Ctr
mother's children lived w/them

140 1499 5th St. Royal b. there Feb. 10, 1899

152 Royal's name on birth certificate
named by godfather--W. Indian after crown prince of England, Edward

158 mother never worked, dif addresses in WO

165 brothers took care of mother--sold pprs & supported family

170 rented in WO--moved for cheaper rent

175 4 boys & 1 girl fr mother's 1st marriage
wd ppr boys, shoe shine on ferry boats
all worked groc store
Ike worked in clubs
Richard, eldest, pullman porter
he married in 1910 & left family

190 more moves for better rent, better conditions, rented entire house
5th & Henry--flat upstairs
moving more northerly

218 mother died in 1920, Royal married in 1920

224 Royal's jobs-ppr route as kid
learned trade--machinist at Marshall Calculator Machine Co.--6 yrs

230 worked in shipyards, machinist
Moore Shipyards
Bethlem Shipbuilding in Ala
Union Ironworks

235 no other blacks worked there too, that was when he was a "Portugee"
unit 1921

240 1921--wkd SP for 6 yrs on dining cars as waiter, head waiter

245 as a "Portugee" was mostly nerve
told him "we're not hiring colored people anymore"
Royal "that's too bad, how are they going to make it?"
picked up Portuguese fr nghbrhd & father

260 bottom fell out of shipyards aftr WW1 so took SP job

264 unions--Royal couldn't get in because he was black
shipyards had unions

270 RR wk
1927 got job w/fire dept.

296 most shipyard employees belonged to union

300 union--dining car cooks & waiters formed c. 1925

310 wages main _____--most money fr tips

320 story of how made fire dept. contact on train

365 made better money as machinist for shipyards ($620) than as a waiter

380 descrip of self as "salesman" trade tricks as waiter

405 made good money in tips--able to keep

420 union helped situation by giving them a spokesman in SF office

430 how got job w/fire dept, pays $200/mo in a lump a/o 1 trip $50 another $70-80
depended on people you had
trained for fire dept job w/help of childhood friend

455 fire dept. colored, but only wht officers

470 reflections--everything in life is a reflection--if you're nice to people, they're nice to you, if you're nasty, etc.

490 all wht officers

520 13th blck appt'd in fire dept, all blck company w/wht officers

550 Royal 1st to break into wht hierarch in fire dept. Then co-workers (wht) realized he too recognized a good-looking woman, had an appetite, ate same things they did, had likes & dislikes & sd, "one thing we have in common--don't like to have feelings hurt, so think when you talk to me"

567 appt'd engineer, only colored engineer

570 appt'd ltnt--then put in a mixed (racially) house

577 "fighter for what he wanted"

600 w/fire dept. 35 yrs for 194_-1962
supported wife & 3 children

615 every other nite spent in firehouse, _____ 2 nites home, 1 nite firehouse--worked for these conditions

655 blck nite life on 7th, blacks spent "blood money" there
he never bothered w/

666 End Tape 2, Side 2

Tape 3, Side 1

000 "blood money"--money they needed to support their families w/

006 social groups
wife--junior 500 club, still in existence
blcks fr Louisiana
Masonic Lodge--30th & San Pablo
blcks had own hall--30th & San Pablo

025 Prince Hall--founder of blck masons

130 visit to Brooklyn shipyards to see son story
Royal uses brogue

060 Prince Hall--Royal has history bk on

064 retired railroad men
photos at EBNHS of railroad & crews

080 Cooper AME Zion--dad's church
grandfather brought to CA
Royal goes to Unity Church of _____--multi-denominational

110 moved to 27th St. btwn Grove & West aftr marriage until 1929
35th & Grove until blt frwy
St. of CA bought house at Rosal where been last 30 yrs

125 mother shopped at 6 St market
even later days Royal & wife shopped there

144 depression--had good job during--fire dept.
credit good

150 1912 Royal left bowels of WO

158 W of Ctr = WO boundaries
W end of his operations
W of Mrkt = official boundaries

165 Royal's circle of friends were kids played baseball w/ at
PF Park for 1912 on
only playground W of Lake

175 vacant
Oak Ball--pk nr Nabisco--vacant lots
vacant lots--mentioned locations
baseball big sport
neighborhood kids teams

205 city bought DR--rec. center--gangland
/ /
rings, nghbr kids
slides around DR

225 soccer played at DF

230 WO Arena--8th & Pine--boxing
Pat McClaine's Gymnasium--rth & Union
Aloha Club--18th & Peralta

242 Olympic Saloon--Link Dennis' place
Lee Johnson--names big WO boxers
Bob McAllister--list in OT Re-Union
Pete Tavis
Cecil Tompson--wltr wght champion of world

260 article "do you remember" reads this

305 famous WO families
"no. 3" rich w/info

335 swimming at estuary
sewage ran out in estuary
high tide OK
low tide--defensive way of swimming
nice beach--estuary use to run to 5th St. area of landfill

363 skinny dipping
then suits after ships came in

365 bath houses
Sutro/Piedmont Baths
1st time knew prejudice when practicing for swim team
said he was cousin of Portuguese
other blacks didn't get in

410 wherever you were at 12:00 that where you ate describes nat'l
dishes at friend's homes

420 crime in WO--never locked your house, nothing to steel
vagrancy--most crimes in wht woman _____ w/blck man

445 families w/money
commission merchant
McDermott 7th & Chester
lived in section together but didn't associate
Melts
Meese (w/Reagan)

465 poor people were most of WO people

485 dif classes in ea nat'l group

490 lot of people had their own little businesses
e.g. restaurants, saloons, barbers--names

495 country outside of city
Acme brewery

525 moving out of area for better living conditions
rich moved out to fancier, poor moved into better

545 nobody always welcomed in dif nghbrhds

621 End Tape 3, Side 1

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ROYAL EDWARD TOWNS

[Biographical essay by Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center for the Cypress Freeway Replacement Project, Caltrans District 4. Essay based on interviews conducted by Pamela Morton, October 1981 for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project (see attached). Additional information from Bill Sturm, Oakland History Room. See also p. 81 and photographs as reprinted in Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco, by Douglas Henry Daniels, 1990.]

Introduction

Royal Edward Towns was born in the Oakland Point District of West Oakland on February 10th, 1899. Mr. Towns worked for the Oakland Fire Department for 35 years, reaching the rank of Lieutenant. He was the first African-American to break the color barrier as a black officer for an all-white engine company. He was also a respected amateur historian and frequent guest speaker for local historical groups. Intelligent, gregarious and an excellent raconteur, Towns brought his memories of pre-1912 West Oakland to life through his ability to narrate stories using a variety of ethnic accents. His skill with language was uncanny. For example, on one occasion he was able to use his West Oakland-acquired brogue to talk his way past an Irish watchman at a Brooklyn shipyard. Impressed, and maybe overwhelmed by the "blarney," the guard finally turned to a fellow employee and said, "Pat come here. Take this Irishman down to the boat!" (Towns, p. 35).

Biography of Royal Towns

Towns probably inherited his facility for languages from his father who spoke at least three, including Spanish and Chinese. William Towns was born in northern Mexico in 1843 of Jamaican immigrants named "Torres". When this part of Mexico became the Republic of Texas the family changed their name to "Towns", to avoid the discrimination handed out to Spanish-surnamed residents. This ability to switch codes and switch identities became crucial to the economic survival of the family.

According to family history, Royal's paternal grandfather came west as the chaplain for General Fremont's army. The family settled in Monterey. Following California's admission to the Union they moved to San Jose where Royal's

grandfather established the first AME Zion church in California. William Towns grew up with Spanish as a second language. Although Royal attributed this to the Spanish-language environment of post-Gold Rush San Jose, it is also probable that the Towns family (Torres) were of mixed Spanish-African descent. Royal described his father as looking Mexican, "like a Yaqui Indian."

At some point the family moved to San Francisco where they remained through the 1880s. William Towns worked as a steward at the Occidental Club in the City, circa 1865. The "Big Four" (Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker and Mark Hopkins) apparently lunched at the club. On one occasion they called Towns over to their table as they were concerned with the issue of how to adequately feed the Chinese crews that they were thinking about hiring. Towns apparently told them not to worry, and offered to set up a kitchen for the Chinese on rolling stock that would follow the gangs. He also assured the investors that language would pose no problem: "Oh, don't think nothing of it. Just put me in with those Chinese for two to three weeks and I'll be able to talk with them. Because I already speak two or three different languages." (Royal Towns interview, p. 15). Whether or not any part of this story is apocryphal or not is difficult to say. Regardless, William Towns apparently worked for the Central Pacific through the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

During the 1870s the Towns family lived in Suisun, the terminus of the railroad, as William worked as a steward on the steamer Amelia. By the 1880s he had settled in West Oakland and worked for the Pullman Company, probably as a cook. In 1907 Towns was paralyzed in a work-related accident.

Elizabeth Ann [Scott] Town had an equally prestigious connection to early California history. Her father, Charles Humphrey Scott, came to California in 1848 and worked as a miner in Placer County where he was a member of the Masonic Lodge. The Scotts were in Oakland by 1860. During the Civil War the family left the United States and resettled in Canada, where they apparently lived in a prosperous section of [town/city unknown]. The Scotts returned to Oakland by 1869 and ran a grocery store between Washington and Broadway.

Elizabeth Ann [Scott] Clark married William Towns in 1898, the second marriage for both. Mrs. Towns' first husband was a ship steward who perished in the explosion of the steamer Julia. William Towns had several children from his first marriage to Alice Rochford Towns. Clark had four boys and a girl from her previous marriage including Thayer, Al, Ike and Richard. Richard worked as a Pullman porter, and with

his other brothers helped support the family after his step-father was injured. Mrs. Towns was apparently quite fair and looked like a little "old Irish lady".

Royal Towns was born at the family home at 1449 Fifth Street in 1899. At birth he was given the name of the attending physician, Alphonus Percival. Towns was later named "Royal Edward" by his West Indian godfather who, in a gesture of patriotism, suggested that the family name their son after the crown prince of England.

The Towns family moved frequently, a common practice in West Oakland, although from 1898 to 1912 they stayed within a five-block radius. From 1449 Fifth Street they moved to a house on Center. By the 1906 earthquake they were living at 7th and Campbell. They then moved to 7th and Peralta, 5th and Henry, and finally to 1657 5th, at Campbell. In 1912 the Towns moved from "the bowels of West Oakland" to 16th and Campbell. Royal's mother died in 1920 at the house they then rented at 16th and Peralta.

Royal Towns grew up playing with a mix of kids who represented the polyglot, multi-ethnic society of West Oakland. Nicknames abounded in West Oakland during this time and Towns's moniker was "George Washington Sugar Doughnuts," because he was <u>first</u> each morning at the local store to buy his favorite delicacy. He spoke Spanish which he learned from his father as well as from neighbors. He also could clearly get by in several other languages, including Portuguese.

Circa 1915 a friend landed him a job as an apprentice machinist at the Marchant Calculating Machine Company. Towns was hired only because he could pass as Portuguese. As he recalls, "Hell, I'd be a Chinaman to get a job!" Although in the 1990s this kind of ethnic code-switching may seem 'politically incorrect,' it was in fact an essential survival skill for many groups in West Oakland through the 1940s. The "passing" of lighter complexioned African-Americans for other ethnic groups, however, did not go unnoticed by other blacks, and Towns, as an example, was rebuked and ostracized for his actions.

Following six years of employment with Marchant Calculating, Royal Towns briefly worked as a machinist at the Union Iron Works, Moore Shipyards in Oakland, and Bethlehem Shipbuilding Company in Alameda. Due to mass layoffs at the close of World War I, and Town's inability to join a Union, he left the better-paid skilled labor of machining to go to work as a waiter for the Southern Pacific. Although he clearly impressed his superiors, the work was not very satisfying. As Towns later quipped, "It took me three years to dislike it and three years to get away from it (Town, p. 27).

Through a fortuitous meeting with his former Marchant Calculating supervisor, Royal Towns landed a job with the Fire Department in 1927. Although in these interviews Mr. Town mentions that he was the 13th black employee hired, in actuality he was the 11th black, and was initially assigned to an all-black company, although managed by white officers. Using his former work connections, Towns made a cross-country trip aboard the Southern Pacific in the 1940s to conduct a survey of blacks in fire departments in other major U.S. cities. Armed with this information he was able to apply for and receive a promotion. He was appointed as a Chief Operator which placed him in an all-white company. He was eventually appointed an Engineer and finally a Lieutenant. His pioneering efforts for racial integration within the Department were, however, not easy personal victories as Towns was criticized by both black as well as white firefighters. It would appear that his early years on the racially-tolerant, albeit tough streets of West Oakland helped him develop tenacity and bravado. He retired in 1962 after 35 years with the Department.

Royal Towns married his wife Lucille in 1920. The couple had three children. Mr. Towns was instrumental in organizing several West Oakland Oldtimers Reunions, an inclusive group which partially offset the racial discrimination of the West-of-Market Street Boys Club. He was also a Founder of the East Bay Negro Historical Society. He died in 1990.

Oral history interviews

In 1981 Pamela Morton conducted two interviews with Mr. Towns for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project under the aegis of the Stanford-Cameron House. These interviews were not transcribed although copies of the tapes were donated to the Oakland History Room. The following indexed transciptions were produced in April 1996 by Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Staff Folklorist for Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center, with funding from Caltrans (Cypress Freeway Replacement Project).

These candid interviews provide an extraordinary resource for the study of (African American) history and community in pre-1912 West Oakland. Highlights include a detailed list of West Oakland nicknames, a description of the impact of the 1906 earthquake, important insights into ethnicity and identity, anecdotes regarding the prevalence of "old boy" networks and job discrimination, and occupational lore. Mr. Town's years with the Fire Department, work largely accomplished outside of West Oakland, are also well-documented.

A USER'S GUIDE TO THE TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW

The following represents a nearly verbatim transcription of the interview. Exceptions are made only for consistent false starts, that is, when a narrator typically begins a sentence with a few words and then immediately starts the sentence again. In addition, common extensions (such as "you know") are minimized in the transcription if their frequency of use is distracting in the read manuscript. In a few cases, names of individuals referenced have been deleted in order to protect the privacy of the individual.

These interviews are in standard conversational English. Thus no attempt has been made to edit or "clean up" speech patterns, or even to correct grammatical errors on the part of either the speaker or the interviewer. Interviews are considered primary historical documents. Just as marriage records or census data are not edited in their original form, so these records have also not been altered. As such these transcriptions record and celebrate the linguistic traditions of a variety of regional, occupational and ethnic groups.

The following punctuation marks are used throughout to signal certain editorial decisions:

[....]	indicates that an entire sentence or thought has been deleted from text
---	three dashes denote that the speaker's thoughts are disjunctive, that is, they have switched ideas mid-sentence
-	a single dash at the end of a sentence indicates that the speaker has been interrupted, normally as part of the flow of conversation
...	three dots are used to show that a few words (but not a complete sentence) have been left out of the text
[sic]	indicates that material as transcribed is as it was recorded by the speaker
[ ]	brackets may include clarification of, or additional information, as provided by either the interviewer or interviewee. Pronunciation of local place names or personal names is also recorded when appropriate.

All transcribed interviews include indexes.

OAKLAND NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Royal Towns

[Interview conduced 23 October 1981 by Pamela Morton with _____ for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project. Verbatim transcription prepared April 1996 by Karana Hattersley-Drayton for Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center, Cypress Freeway Replacement Project, Caltrans District 4.]

[Labeled Tape 2, Side 1 (according to summary)]

[Tape begins in mid-conversation]

Towns: "[....] And another thing I noticed in there was 'the shoots.' My dad used to take me to 'the shoots' when I was a little kid, but I never knew where the shoots was. Not the shoots at the beach, this shoots was up around 10th Avenue and Haight Street, near Golden Gate Park. Up in there. Then there was a picture of the Shoots ... and where you used to 'shoot the shoots.' You got in this sort of a round tub-like thing and you shot the shoots."

Morton: "Like a slide?"

Towns: "[He notes that "Tony" has a book that apparently shows a picture or talks about this. He notes that this book only mentions one black man's name in San Francisco.] San Francisco had a whole black section burn out there during the fire. I know because we had a lot of refugees at my place."

Morton: "You did?"

Towns: "I was seven-years-old then."

Morton: "Of blacks?"

Towns: "When the earthquake came. We had three or four people living with us, we lived on Campbell, Seventh and Campbell at that time."

Morton: "Do you remember where else---like churches and organizations that had tents and things set up for people?"

Towns: "Well, there were some organizations. But ours was just our family goodwill [chuckles]. It was all, toward our friends that we knew and they stayed there with us. Yes, there were organizations that helped a whole lot."

Morton: "So you knew people in San Francisco [Towns: "Oh sure!"] that after the earthquake came right to you [Towns: "That's right"] because they knew who you were and knew you would help them."

Towns: "Right because, well the Towns family, geez they were part of San Francisco until 1880 and then they moved over here. You saw that picture 1881 ... Lincoln School, 1881, class of Lincoln School."

Morton: "In San Francisco, and then they moved here."

Towns: "...oh I remember vividly, that morning, what happened. I remember my brother saying 'Oh Lord, have mercy. Lord have mercy.' 'Bout that time the bricks on the chimney came down [slight laugh] into our house."

Morton: "In West Oakland?"

Towns: "West Oakland. Yeah."

Morton: "You felt it pretty badly then...?"

Towns: "Oh yes. Well you couldn't get out the front door. You had to go out the back door. We had a dog there, and it scared that dog so much, all you had to do was make a noise and that dog would run and cower."

Interviewer 2: "Did that happen all over the neighborhood, this bad, of chimneys falling down?"

Towns: "Well yes, several buildings in Oakland were damaged. The Baptist Church there, at 21st and Telegraph there, shook that all to pieces. I had a picture around the house some place showing that."

Morton: "Well was that a brick church, was it brick, the Baptist Church?"

Towns: "Stone. It was stone, yes."

Interviewer 2: "Did you witness people coming across the Bay...?"

Towns: "Oh yes. Yes, I was just going to tell you that. That morning, that was around 5:30 when that happened, 5:20, 5:30. And so about 6 o'clock, we was up, it was bright, you know. So I seen that train coming down Seventh Street, the old steam train, people were all on top of the cars and everything."

Morton: "And did they take a ferry to [Oakland]?"

Towns: "Yes, they took the ferry. Of course, you know, you come down Seventh Street and the Seventh Street local to the pier. And down at the pier you got on the ferry boat and went to San Francisco."

Morton: "Yeah, so a lot of the refugees came by the ferry boat. Did you see any of them coming across on their own boats, or rafts or-"

Towns: "Well, we saw people coming over and we saw some of them get the horse and wagons and they get out. But there used to be a special ferry boat to carry the horse and wagons, called the Crick Route. It used to come in at First and Broadway. Uh-huh. They would call that the nickle ferry. And those of us who didn't have money enough to go to San Francisco, pay a dime to go on that train, we'd walk up to First and Broadway and get on that nickle ferry and go on to San Francisco. We could go over and come back for a dime, which costs a dime to go just one way, see? Yeah."

Morton: "How many people actually came over, right after the earthquake?"

Towns: "I couldn't give you [figures], a whole lots of people came over.":

Morton: "Yeah, but was that happening over weeks? Were they still coming, or did they come all sort of within a couple of days?"

Towns: "Well I think within a couple of days, I think within a couple of days, because when you're burned out, you have to find some place to go. And those people found friends over in Oakland."

Morton: "And did you say the entire black section in San Francisco was destroyed?"

Towns: "Yes, the entire black section went out. Now this fella that wrote this book, Professor Daniels [Ed. Note: Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco], the one that had my picture in there, he lectured over there in San Francisco one day at the historical group over there, and he was telling that San Francisco was a city that never had ghettos and they had no black section, so forth. I didn't want to interrupt him! I let him talk [slight laugh], I knew better than that! Because I know, my dad used to carry me to San Francisco to see friends of ours. They all lived down around, oh [stops to think] its south of Mission Street there, between 3rd and the Bay, south of Mission Street. There was a whole colored section in there, where lots of colored people got burned out during that [fire and earthquake]."

Morton: "Were there other sections, as well. Or is it just the one?"

Towns: "Well it was just that one there. And then of course there was a whole lot of blacks that lived out near the Presidio, because after the Spanish American War, a lot of them were stationed there at the Presidio. And consequently, they got places near them to live, those that didn't want to live on the encampment. They lived near there. We used to go out there quite [frequently]; out there, oh Sergeant Meyers' home. Sergeant Meyers and Lieutenant Rose, we used to go out there. That's way out, what they call Cow Hollow now. And when you would look from there, down where oh the fair [the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915] was, in those days the Bay came way up, and they filled all that in. The railroad train used to run, oh from Fillmore Street to Sutro Baths but it would go way out there in that water. But they filled all that land in there to make the Exposition, see?"

Morton: "So when that black section was destroyed in the earthquake, did all of those people come to Oakland?"

Towns: "Most of them came to Oakland, most of them came to Oakland. They settled over here in Oakland. San Francisco, after that fire, it put a lot of fear, well it brought a lots of people over here to Oakland. Oakland wasn't much until that fire. Brought lots of people over here."

Morton: "Were there many blacks in Oakland before the fire?"

Towns: "Oh yes, West Oakland, yeah because of the Pullman Company and the Southern Pacific. That was where most of the employment was, in Oakland. Because the Pullman Company hired blacks as porters and the Southern Pacific hired cooks and waiters. At one time around here, it's all they had was cooks and waiters, Red Caps and things."

Morton: "So those were the main jobs that blacks had."

Towns: "Yes. That's right."

Morton: "And did they run saloons and boarding houses?"

Towns: "Oh yes, they had saloons. Oh, they had all kinds of saloons and things like that. Yeah, I think I told you about that man coming in from Old [?] College and he wanted to know about West Oakland. Finally, when I got through talking to him, he says, 'Geez, Mr. Towns, I notice you've got a variety of saloons there.' 'Yeah' I said, 'I guess you must have thought I was a wino or something, huh?' And he says, 'Well I commenced to wonder.' I said, 'No,' I

said, 'Most all of the blacks that had businesses in West Oakland were saloons, or pool rooms.' You see?

And then of course there were groups of saloons, according to the nationalities too. They had racial saloons. The Portuguese had two or three saloons: Rose's, Joe Birnadi [?], and Sarment. And the Italians had their saloons: it was Pasquini, Portola, and, well an Italian bought out Joe Raymond.... And then there was Slovonian saloons. The Irish, the Irish: there's two places the Irish went, that's to church and to the saloons."

Morton: "To the saloons. Did they have most of the saloons then in West Oakland?"

Towns: "I beg pardon?"

Morton: "Did the Irish have most of those saloons?"

Towns: "Oh, the Irish had three or four saloons: there was Lynch's and Connallys, and Ryans, Simpson, yeah there was a lot of, Olsens and-"

Morton: "And so then did these national saloons cater to the same group?"

Towns: "The same group mostly. And they, there might have been some intermixture there.... But the blacks had their own saloons, they had their own. They had Turner and Dotson, had the Turf, uh Link Dennis has the Olympic, that's where Jack Johnson used to train. And they used to get the kids in the neighborhood: one of the black kids and one of the white kids, and we'd have the Johnson and Jeffries fight there [slight laugh]. Then the Williams and Lionel and George Gordon's Oak Leaf, and Fisher's ... and the Keystone, oh it was all kinds. And then of course the other national groups, the Italians had, the Toscanos, they had their saloon. Grand opera, we didn't have radio to hear that but all those same songs that they sang at the Grand Opera, we used to go down Saturday night and listen to those Italians sing the songs. Get drunk in there. They had their particular group. And the Slovonians, they had their saloons.

So, but there never was any mixtures between groups fighting. I never saw a racial fight in West Oakland, an interracial fight. Oh, kids, kids, you know, they fight over a drop of the hat, or something."

Morton: "Why was that? Was it because they were all on the same sort of economic level? Was there something they had in common?"

Towns: "Well yes, I would say, I would say that. I would say the Southern Pacific brought the Irish into Oakland. They brought the Irish in, as Paddies to work on the tracks and things like that. And they brought a lot of the blacks in to work on the railroads. And then later on the Greeks, they brought in the Greeks. And then there was Portugee gangs and Mexican gangs that they brought in to, you know, build up the railroad yards down there. So, the Southern Pacific had a great impact down there in West Oakland. But they did a lot of hiring. And of course I know that Father Mac was responsible for lots of fellas that were engineers and things for the Southern Pacific, down there. Yeah."

Interviewer 2: "What about the Swedes and the Arabians: They didn't work on the railroad. How did they end up there?"

Towns: "The Swedes, they---I don't know. I know the Janson's [he pronounces this in a Scandinavian manner, 'Yantzen'; could also be spelled 'Johnson'] lived around the corner from me. Swede Janson, he worked some of the factories or something around there."

Interviewer 2: "But you don't know what <u>brought</u> some of these other groups here? We know the railroad brought some of the other groups."

Towns: "Yeah, we know the railroad brought a lot of them. No. I don't know too much about these other imports. You know?"

Morton: "Now when do you remember, like the Slovonians. Do you remember what period they came in?"

Towns: "Oh, I would say around 1904, 1905. In through there."

Morton: "Before the earthquake."

Towns: "Yeah, then of course a lot of Slovonians I was just telling you, came from San Francisco over here, after the earthquake. Tony would tell you his family came over here, see?"

Interviewer 2: "What groups do you remember dramatically increasing after the earthquake? Do you remember a big increase in Greeks or-"

Towns: Well, I don't know. My favorite groups were the Italian, they were the nicest people. I still have many of my friends that are Italian that were down there. Course, those days I guess the main---I'll tell you a story. This teacher out here at Bishop O'Doul School here, I think that's what they call it. He came to me and he wanted to

write something about what happened in West Oakland about the national groups down there. See? I said, 'Well they had different classifications of people. They had the Dagos and they had the Italians.' You understand? But the Italians were the people that had business or something like that. A lot of the Italians, Dagos, worked for them, those were the people that just came in here, from the Old World."

Morton: "So the difference was that the established Italians and then the newer arrivals?"

Towns: "That's right. And then they had the Portuguees and the Portuguese. The Portuguese were the people that [ran businesses] .... If you were a Portugee, you're just an old working class man, see? And then there was the colored people and the niggers. There was two different classes. And then, what else was there down there. Oh, the Arabians. And A-rabs, we called them, A-rabs. They all had some sort of business... mostly mercantile goods. They used to have fellas go around with a big suitcase and go to your house and show you different things. And then of course later on, they established stores.

And you could go by the names of the stores we had in West Oakland. Here was Lekas's, they were Greeks; they had a big grocery store in West Oakland. And then the ... Shaneen, Shaheen: they had a big place down there that they sold things. And Bomarod, they had a store, they were Arabians. And then look at the drug stores: Gonzalez, that's a Spanish name. Gonzalez, Sandlin; Sandlin I guess, Sandlin might have been a Swede."

Morton: "Now were these all on Seventh Street?"

Towns: "On Seventh Street. Yes. Except when you went to a drug store. You either went to Glyons, to Gonzalez, or you went to Sandlins."

Morton: "And what time period were these all?"

Towns: "Oh, this was on up to, well 1912. Up to 1912 in there. Because I moved away from down in there in 1912. See? And then the different stores: you had Iben and Nuer: Iben (German), Nuer (German). And then Lavue, Frenchman, ran a butcher shop. Teaque [?] was one of the Irishmen that run the saloon there. Then Nor, Nor, Andrew J. Nor ran the big livery stable. Now the livery stable was just as important in those days as taxi cabs are today, because when people wanted to travel, they would, you know they go down there and rent a hack, a horse and a buggie, things like that. And then the furniture company, McIntyre. McIntyre was a Scotchman. Across the street was McAlister; McAlister worked on stoves. McAlister was Irish. And then Mrs. Holtz; Mrs. Holtz had a store in there and she was German.

Then Dragovitch ran a grocery store. He was Slovonian. Those guys, they come in here with some sort of business. You see?"

Morton: "Yeah, that's quite a list. Well, just to backtrack for a minute, when you talked about the conflict then between the two groups: for example, with the Italians, did the established Italians help out the newer arrivals or what?"

Towns: "They, they helped the new arrivals. Sure, ... you was an Italian, you was, what do they call them, *paisano*. Yeah [slight laugh], you were a countryman. Yes, they all worked toward helping each other."

Morton: "And with the black then too, you said there were also conflicts between those two groups: the more established and the new arrivals. What group constituted those newer arrivals? When did they come in and where from?"

Towns: "Well they were sort of ostracized for a while, until they proved themselves. You know, they came in here. There wasn't too much that a black man could do around here, outside of being a janitor and a cook or a waiter or something like that. There was very few: some men, oh one or two of them were in banks, worked in the bank. Johnson and Lee worked in banks. But Lee was taken off of the dining car by a Mr. Fleischacker, was one of the San Francisco millionaire bankers. Lee used to wait on him all the time and he says, 'With a personality like you got, you belong in my bank.' And so he made a teller out of him. He was the first black teller and Willie Johnson. Willie Johnson, the first man I ever heard, says sprained his wrist [begins to laugh] counting dollar bills! Yeah. So, some of them had good jobs.

But then of course there were lots of Negroes had jobs according to their colors. If you could get by for something else, well you went on. You either intermarried or you---there's lots of intermarriages. We know lots of people here in this community that, well, they say a man is black if he's got one drop of black blood in him. Well geez then there's a whole lot of blacks that we know that are Hawaiian [?/White?]."

Morton: "Well how did that work then? Was a black with a lighter complexion, did he associate himself with a different group and dissociate himself from the blacks?"

Towns: "Well later on he did, after he, or she married into another group. They formed a different group altogether. I got it in my family. I've got a nephew, he's the head of one of the big automobile establishments in San Francisco.

He's my, well, my brother-in-law's kid. And there are numerous others. I had a fella just recently come here from New York. He hadn't been here for years and he was pleased to see me. And he says, 'Geez I went to look up certain fellas and I couldn't find them because if they get by for white, they don't want [you] to bother them.' And I belong to that historical association over there. And we talk about old-timers. And I say, There's an old-timer by the name of Captain Lun that was a Negro, was a Captain. I says, but they didn't know what Lun was. He had some sort of disease that made his face all white. And his hands all white, but his body was all black [short laugh]. And so, he got to be a Captain. And so I was telling the folks over there, said 'Well Shorey wasn't the only colored Captain on the coast. There was a Captain by the name of Lun.' And they said, 'How do you know?' And I said, 'Because he told me!' I said, 'I was in the firehouse one night and he come out and he said, 'Towns, I know your family better than you do. He says I know your grandmother established the Old Folks Home out there in Beulah, which is now Mills College.'"

Morton: "Oh what was the name of that?"

Towns: "It's called Scotts ..... He said before there was an old folks home, my family home was the old folks home. My grandma's home was the old folks home. And he got to talking so my aunt was living then. I said, 'Aunt Emma, did you know a man by the name of Captain Lun?' And she says, 'Oh yeah, he was a seafarin' man. He married Auggie Lun, that was one of our friends.' So, you very seldom do you hear about a white man marrying a colored woman, that is those days. They'd live with them or something like that. But anyway, I told the curator over there at the Negro Museum over there on Grove Street about it. And he went down to look it up, and he says, 'Oh no,' he says, 'that man was an Indian.' And I said, 'Oh hell,' I'd say, 'they'd be any damn thing to get the job.' I said, 'I'll give you an experience of mine.' I says, 'One of the Italian boys down in West Oakland, by the name of Scazafava met me one day and he says, 'Roy, are you workin'?' He says, 'No.' He says, 'You need a job?' I says, 'Yes, I do.' He said, 'Well I'm going to get you a job but don't get mad at me.' I said, 'Don't get mad at you for what?' He says, 'Don't tell them what you are.' I said, 'Hell, I'd be a Chinaman to get a job.' [Slight laugh] You know? And so, I worked in this particular plant but this brother was the boss out there and nobody could say anything against me. One fella thought he'd be wise one day and he says 'Towns, I know you're a Negro.' He says, 'I know you're just like a friend of mine, Charlie Vinneval [?]. Charlie speaks with a foreign accent but he's got no language to black [back?] it up.' 'Well,' I said, 'I don't speak with any foreign accent.' I said, 'from associations with Portuguese and Italian and things

down there, I picked up a few words and things like that.' He said, 'But I know you and I know that guy over there are colored.' 'Well,' I says, 'just to show you how wrong you are, 'I said, 'you call him over here. Don't say *Vien ici* [pronounced "Viniki"], any fool knows that means 'Come here' in any Latin-derivative language. I said, 'But tell him, if you've got a few minutes, I'd like to hold a conversation with you.' So, he told him that in Italian, see? This fella, well they talked for about ten minutes, I went on back to my machine. So later on he come over and he apologized to me. He said, 'I'm sorry Roy.' And I said, 'Well you know, there's a whole lot of white-black people in this world, and there's a lot of black-white people. And you don't know who's who. I says, 'You find it in my race, uh fair with blue eyes, blond hair to black as the ace of spades with brown eyes. Uh, this fellow, he was talking to him, he was from one of the islands off of the boot [of Italy] down there. Yeah. And he spoke Italian well, we forgot all about it. He said, 'Geez, I didn't know that.' He said, 'He just saw his complexion.' I said, 'Can't you think of some black battalions that you've got?' He said, 'Sure. You know some black battalions?' Because I know if there's any group that's ever prejudicial it's that Italian group. Those Italians that live up around Genoa, they have no respect for the Italians that live down around the Boot."

Morton: "That's true. Has that happened here, too?"

Towns: "Yes."

Morton: "In that the Italians from Genoa who are now in Oakland do they, are they prejudiced against other Italians?"

Towns: "Ohhh, no, not so much. Not so much. In the districts where they lived, they were all, all mixed, the Genoveses and the Polentanos [?], and they were all mixed together. They, later on, as they grew up, they went to a different place. Course now in West Oakland, Thirteenth Street was known as 'Tin Can Alley.' That's where all the Italians lived. Thirteenth Street between Sutter and Kirkham Street. See, Cypress didn't run through then."

Morton: "And why was it called 'Tin Pan [sic] Alley'?"

Towns: "Well 'Tin Can Alley' because most of the Italians that lived in there worked for the Scavenger Company, which turned to be the Oakland Scavenger Company."

Morton: "Oh. Oh I see so that was their business. They were collecting scrap metal and-"

Towns: "That's right. You know, the refuse and things you turn out, garbage. They were garbage collectors. I

remember when they used to pay two bits a month [slight laugh]."

Morton: "And getting back to the black now, you were talking about---well do you think that was true for most of the blacks ... that they had the same feeling you did. That they'd do anything to get a job? That that was the most important thing?"

Towns: "I think so. I think so. I know that there were lots of light Negroes that got jobs that they didn't know what they were, that the blacks couldn't get. And of course that set up sort of an enmity between the two of them: they didn't like that at all. The Blacks didn't, you know?"

Morton: "You mean, the blacks had problems within themselves, between the lighter and the darker complexions?"

Towns: "Yes, that is certain people when they know you got the job so, 'Oh he wants to be a Portugee or some other damn thing' and gets that [?].' I had that when I went to the firehouse, when I went to work at the firehouse. I had some of the white fellas say, 'What's he going in as? Is he going in as a Negro, is he going in as white? Because he speaks three or four different languages.' See? Because they knew that down there in West Oakland that's the only thing you did was talk with them guys in their native language. Some of the kids come over from the Old Country, that's all they could talk. And you remembered what they said. And then when I got out with the colored fellas, 'Geez that guy, he wants to be white. He worked for years for the Marshall Calculating Machine Company. Now the Depression or something's hit in here and now he wants to come in here.' See? One of the guys told me one day he says, '...you were a Hindu or some other damn thing before you come here. What did you come in here for?' I said, 'Well I suppose the last six years I worked on the railroad I was getting by for a Chinaman, huh?' [Laughs] And that ended all, all the conversation there. But I had to live all that down. Because of the way we were raised in West Oakland.

Now, let me give you an example: we all used to swim down in the estuary. And those pictures, you see all different colors. All those pictures were taken before 1914. After 1914 and the War and they started bringing a lot of blacks to work in the shipyard and laboring jobs, and things like that. Well, they brought in a lot of artisans, a lot of black carpenters and things [?] couldn't get jobs before. But they were carpenters in the south where they worked, and cement workers and things like that. And so, anyway, ... the kids, we all swam down there together. When they brought these blacks in here, from Texas and Louisiana and Alabama and Georgia and every place, doggone [hits table] if

they didn't find a different place for themselves to swim. They're segregating their own selves."

Morton: "Really?"

Towns: "Yes, they found a place where we never bothered about the place-"

Morton: "Just because that's what they had done in the South?"

Towns: "That's what they were accustomed, they wasn't accustomed to that. Because we swam down there they looked down upon us because we swam down there with the rest of those kids. So, I don't know. It was funny, course, within my own family, see I was the only one: I've got two sides of my family, my mother's side and my father's side. And, on my father's side, they're all older than I. And, on my mother's side, ...all of them were older than me. I was the kid brother, the half-brother. So anyway, most of my brothers were raised down there in West Oakland. They played baseball and everything else: they didn't know nothing about no color line. They ran around with all the kids and things like that. So, of course, when these other guys come in here, they couldn't see that, because that wasn't the way they were raised. They didn't run that way."

Morton: "Yeah. But with you... as kids together, everybody got along fine."

Towns: "That's right."

Morton: "How about the parents of those kids? Well how did they feel about your mixing?"

Towns: "We got along all right. Parents got along fine."

Morton: "Did the parents mix, as well?"

Towns: "Well, they were nice, they were always nice, nice to my mother. Course my mother looked like you. Oh yeah, my mother looked like an old Irish woman just to see her. Cause if I go down the street with my father, they would say, 'Look at the little white kid with the colored man.' And if I went with my mother down the street, they'd say 'Look at the little white lady with a colored boy.' So that was the difference between. Because all the brothers on my mother's side, they're all fair. All very light. But on the other side, they were all my color."

Morton: "Tell me a little bit about your family. How long have they been in Oakland? I know that you said you had six generations in California."

Towns: "Well, I could go back to, go out to St. Mary's College there, St. Mary's cemetery and find a grave, 1860. There's a grave, 1860. And I had a historian from San Francisco, Mr. James de Abajian, I guess maybe you've heard of him, and he and I worked together quite a bit. And so I was telling him about the grave. So we went on out there to look at the graves. So he said, 'Well let's go inside and get some information.' So we went inside and found out who was in the grave. And so the fella says, 'Oh,' he says, 'but that 1860, that's wrong; this cemetery didn't get here until 1874.' So I told the guy, 'Well, ' I says, 'You know, you should learn a little more about your job.' I said, '...I just take that as ignorance, you don't know any better. But, 'I says, 'at one time the cemetery was down here at 18th and Alice Street. And they moved the cemetery, as Oakland grew.... [His grandmother used to take a streetcar and get off at this site?]

"At 1860, we got that there. And then of course on the other side, the Towns, that's the Scott side, and on the Towns side, they came here with Fremont's army, before there was a California. And old man Scott came here in the days of the gold mine. Old man Scott was a goldminer and in fact Debadjian found his name up in Placer County in 1848. And just recently ... one of the librarians has been in touch with me about old Masonic lodges .... And he had a paper there and this paper showed the notice of dissolution of property where Scott sold out to charity. See? Now, that seemed funny there. But in my inquisitiveness, I've always been inquisitive. When I was a kid, I couldn't ask my grandfather nothin'. I'd say 'Hello Grandpa, goodbye Grandpa.' I had specific orders to do that. Not to hold conversation with him, unless he spoke to me first."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. That was the manners then."

Towns: "That was the manners, that's what you were taught. That reminds me of the night, I spoke over to the Westerner's Corral. The Westerner's Corral is a group of historians, west of Chicago. And they call themselves a corral rather than call themselves a lodge and things like that. So I had to speak over there.... So when I finished talking to them, the first man jumped up was a professor at Stanford University down there, Lap, Professor Lap. And he said, 'Mr. Towns, did you ever sit down and talk to your grandfather about the days in the gold mine.' I says, [slight laugh] 'Geez Mr. Lap,' I said, 'do you know when I was raised I had a specific code of orders and that was, they taught us manners, youngsters how to get along with Grandpa. And I was to say Good morning Grandpa or goodnight Grandpa, whatever the occasion was, and to speak when I was spoken to. Other than that, I was to be seen and not heard. So many times, Hello grandpa, Hello Grandpa; I'd see Grandpa in different places.' But Grandpa, if he had shared his

experiences, Shoot! I wouldn't have been sitting here talking to you now. I would have had, you know, a better education and look forward to other things. I had to wait until after I got to be a man to find this thing out.

So after I finished making this talk over there, this man who owns a whole gang of drugstores in San Francisco, called me up; oh, three or four different people called me up. Says, 'Royal, we were really pleased with your answer last night. Your answer was worth that whole talk. Because in my car going home I had six men with me. And there wasn't a man in that car that wasn't raised like that. And three or four other fellas where we talked in that gathering last night said, Geez, this guy was raised the same way we were!'"

Morton: "Yeah, that was the Victorian way."

Towns: "So anyway, I used to listen to my mother talk. I learned a lot by listening and my dad taught me that, years and years ago. That when somebody tells you something, you listen, and let it sink in and go. And he used to experiment with me, going across to San Francisco on a boat. He'd say, 'Roy, you see those two boats out there?' I say, 'Yes, sir.' Said, 'They got names.' I said, 'They have? What's their names?' You know a little kid, he's inquisitive. And oh, this was way before the earthquake, yeah before the earthquake. And he says, 'Well one of them is the *State of California* and the other's the *Pueblo*.' And then the old man would take me all different places. The old man had an idea of educating me by showing me things and telling me to remember this and remember that. So that night, we got home and had dinner, got ready to go to bed. I guess he thought I'd forgotten about what went on. He come up in my room he said, 'Royal, I took you for a ride today in San Francisco.' 'Yes,' I said, 'I liked that very nice, it was very nice, dad.' Course we had a regular route too. We left there, we stopped at Lynch's Saloon: the old man had a shot of whiskey and I had a saspirilla. That's as---any time I went out with the old man, I knew I was going to get that. Because when I came back home I told my mother that Papa had 'whicky' and I had 'sasparwiwa'. [Laughs] You know? So anyway, he comes up into the bedroom and he says, 'Did you enjoy yourself today Roy?' I says, 'Yes sir.' He says, 'I showed you two boats out on the Bay, didn't I?' 'Yes you did Dad.' 'What was their names?' I better tell him: *State of California* and the *Pueblo*. See? And that was just, the way.

But the thing: it was common to go down the street. The old man, he was a different color than I. He looked like one of them Mexicans. ... he had that kind of a Mexican color. I go down to Tijuana today, I see him, or any place in Mexico, I see my father, it looks just like him. Looks like one of

them Yaqui Indians. So, we go down the street in San Francisco and somebody would walk up to him and say something in Spanish. The old man would tell them, such and such a place, because the old man could speak two or three different languages, see? But this day, he took me over to Chinatown. And [they] all looked like they were going to bed, they had the black pajamas on. The women wore black clothes and the men wore black clothes. And the men had queues and the little caps on their head. And the women had beautiful shoes on. And so, we were walking along there and my dad was telling me about different things and so, he saw some Chinaman and he said to him: [Mr. Towns speaks as though in a Chinese dialect]. That's the way it sounded to me, you know. And the Chinaman looked at my dad, he kept on going. And my dad hollered [speaks again as if in Chinese]. The Chinaman started talking and I started laughing. The Chinaman come to realize that the old man could talk that.

But I never learned until I was a man, how the old man learned Chinese. I was married and my brother Wallace came back. My brother Wallace left when I was around three-years-old. And I was around 21 or 22 and he come back and he was asking me stories, telling stories about the old man. I told him that one about the memory and about the boats and I told him that one about Chinatown. He said, 'Well didn't Dad ever tell you about how he learned Chinese?' I said, 'No, he never.' I says, 'In fact Dad and I never sat down and talked by ourselves. We went on trips and things like that and we talked about things on the trips.... So anyway, I says, 'No he didn't.' And he said, 'Well when they built ... the transcontinental railroad, the Central Pacific, your dad was a steward at that time when they were contemplating that at the Occidental Club in San Francisco. And the Occidental Club, the 'Big Four' [ed. note: Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker and Mark Hopkins]... they were all there. My dad was a steward in that club. And so they had problems and so they thought they'd discuss problems with my old man, being the steward. He fed the men in the club so they figured he'd have to know something about feeding these Chinese that they were going to bring in. So he told them, he says, 'Well Billy, we're going to bring in a bunch of these Chinese from, well coolies from China. But we're going to run into a problem.' 'Oh what is that?' 'We haven't got enough money to put an eating house for them every ten miles, to feed them.' Says, 'We don't know how to do it.' So my old man says, 'Well that's easy.' Says, 'Well what I do, you've got the cars. Put a range in a car and put the tables in the car and move along with it.' And so he says, 'Well, we've got another problem.' 'What's that?' 'A language barrier.' So the old man says, 'Oh, don't think nothing of it. Just put me in with those Chinese for two or three weeks and I'll be able to talk with them. Because I already speak two or three different languages.'

See he was raised in San Jose. And those days, when he was raised in San Jose, nine out of every ten people spoke Spanish. So Spanish was the second language in the family. Then as he grew up he got a job in the post office, and the job which was very similar to what rural free delivery would be today. And he had to go to these different places and deliver these letters to these foreigners who were working as farmers on these different places. So he picked up, you know, just conversational, 'How are you?' weather, things like that [to have] conversation with them. So that's how he got that. Of course Spanish down in San Jose, those days the stores down there. I seen some of the old pictures he had, they were after I got married and after I left home. I left all them old pictures of all them old railroad trestles, and the building and the construction of the Central Pacific.... And I left them with my brothers and I don't know what become of them. And so, anyway, why Dad showed me these pictures of these stores where they had on there *carneceria*, 'butcher shop,' written underneath it. See? And *sasteria*, tailoring shop, tailor shop. Then all different things like that. Was all in there. So it was only natural for him to pick that up."

Morton: "Yeah, so that was sort of part of adapting as you said. Identifying yourself with different ethnic groups or that that's really how he came up with jobs. That he had to be that way, really, in order to survive."

Towns: "That's right. That's right."

Morton: "Be flexible. Course ... my family background on that side, they came from Jamaica to Mexico. The part of Mexico that they settled in, they saw that turned to the Republic of Texas. My dad was born in 1843 in the Republic of Texas. Then they saw it, a State of Texas. And then when Fremont [pronounced Free-mont, with accent on second syllable] and that group of the army, they joined the army and came west. And that's when my dad, they brought the whole family out to Monterey. Then after California became a state, then they moved to San Jose. My grandfather established the first AME Zion church there, in San Jose. He was evidently a chaplain in Fremont's army. So that's the history there, along that side. But our family name wasn't always Towns, according to some of my brothers. It was 'Torres.' And ... after Texas was declared a Republic, if you had a Spanish-sounding name, you didn't get a job. So that's when the old man changed his name to Towns."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. Another adaption."

Towns: "That's right. That's what I gather. You see, being the kid brother, my next oldest brother on the Towns' side was 21-years older than I. The next brother on the

Clark side, my mother's side, was 11 years older than I. Course, we had a little closer friendship. I was always my brother's 'little brother.' But he was always finding [?] me, my brother Thayer. But I didn't get the chance to talk too much but I listened and I listened and I listened. And I heard my mother talk about the Civil War days, when they left here and they went to Canada. And she went to school in Canada. And oh, different things like that. So, I always figured, if I ever got a job, got some money, that's where I'd go. So, after I worked a few years in the fire department and I had enough money to go off on a vacation trip, we went on up to Canada. And I went to the Canadian archives. [He notes that a nice young woman helped him. Towns mother's family lived in Canada from 1861-1865 but he does not say which town. He mentions that family lived in the Bay Area, which he verifies from uncle's gravestone 1860 at St. Mary's Cemetery. He looks through the Canadian directory for 1863. Grandfather's name was apparently Charles Humphrey Scott; he lived in one of the better sections of town.]

End of Tape 2, Side 1

Tape 2, Side 2 (as identified in the summary)

[Tape begins in mid-conversation.]

Towns: ...and the letters, that was when that was a Provincial Territory up there. And he read letters from the Secretary General regarding his property. And it seemed like the Hudson Bay Company didn't want my grandfather to have this because he was black. But then it was overruled by the Secretary General up there. And [he] had these letters, and he went on to show me how this place had changed hands. First it was the King's taxes, the government took it for the king's taxes. And since then it was sold a couple of times so it cost me quite a bit of money to get it. Well I told him I wasn't interested in it but I knew that they had some land up there in the [?] River Region. So anyway, he said 'Mr. Towns, could you send me some pictures of your grandmother and your grandfather?' I said, 'Well what do you want them for?' He said, 'Well I want to put them on exhibit up here in the archives.' So I said, 'Sure, I could do that.' [He continues this narrative; he goes to the St. Anne's Academy for further information about his mother who attended school there between 1861-1865. He meets an old nun, 98-years-old, who has information about the past. Towns' mother had told him that when they ordered groceries from the store, the Indians would deliver them. There were several black families in this community. Towns asks her how they fared---apparently some were business owners and had lovely homes.]

Pamela Morton: "That grave marker, that had 1860 on it, that means that your mother's-"

Towns: "That we were here!"

Morton: "-family was here in Oakland."

Towns: "Oh we were here in Oakland, sure."

Morton: "And your father's family: when do you think they were first in Oakland?"

Towns: "Well, they were San Jose people. ...they came up here in later years. I think my father came to Oakland in the 1880s. Because like I say, the closest that I could figure to that is the picture of the Lincoln School in 1881, that's a hundred years ago. So I chased down dates of my father. Now my brother told me that my father worked at the Occidential Club in San Francisco. Oh crazy history reminded me---I had to go to San Francisco and go through the directories over there and find out. And I sure did. I found my dad was a stewart at the Occidential Club in 1865, I guess it was."

Morton: "Uh-huh. Does that mean that he was living in San Francisco or-"

Towns: "Yeah, that's right. They lived in San Francisco. My brother, Bill, was born in San Francisco. And then I started tracing the following years. And then I found out that, well of course I knew that my dad worked on the construction of the railroad. That finished around, oh [18]69, the first transcontinental train came in here. And my mother saw it from my father's grocery store, here in Oakland, on Center Street between Washintgon and Broadway."

Morton: "She saw the train come in?"

Towns: "She saw that train come in. My mother saw that. But my dad, evidently, he worked with the railroad. He died, when he died he was paralyzed: he worked for the Pullman Company. But he worked for the Pullman Company when the Pullman Porter not only did the making up the beds and things but he did the cooking. Those Pullman Palace cars that they first put out, they had the dining section in there. And the Pullman porter cooked for the people. A lot of people in later years thought the Southern Pacific Company diners were Pullman diners, you see?

So anyway, I started looking up these different names up into the 70s. And I saw where my dad was in the 70s, where he was a steward on the steamer Amelia. And the steamer Amelia ran between ... Suisun and San Francisco. ...see

when the first transcontinental train came into California, it only came to Sacramento. And then they came from Sacramento to Oakland and San Francisco by boat. Then later on they bridged the river and started building down, and they got down as far as Suisun and they couldn't go no further, because of the marsh land there. And I spoke up in the college, up at Solano, recently, I told them, 'You know you folks are rich with history around here. At one time this was, the Western Metropolis of the Central Pacific Railroad."

Morton: "Oh the terminus."

Towns: "It was the terminus there. And so, I said to my brother, Wallace was born here in '72. So the time that I speak of, from '72, it's around '72. [A professor at the college called back a week later to say that his students had done research to verify Towns' accounts. They researched birthdate of brother, etc. Mr. Towns notes that the book he used to research his family's history in San Francisco (city directories?) was missing from the library.]

"...And I found my family records where they lived in different places in San Francisco, up into the 70s, the late 70s. But then after that, well they moved over here to Oakland. That's a long way to tell you about how long that family's been in Oakland. That's the Town side of the family."

Morton: "Well when did your parents marry?"

Towns: "...in 1898."

Morton: "In 1898? And now-"

Towns: "That was his second marriage."

Morton: "For your father?"

Towns: "Father and my mother."

Morton: "And your mother?"

Towns: "Yeah, because they both had children on both sides. My mother had her children by the first husband, who was killed by the way---it shows you these steamships have something to do with my family background---my father was a stewart on the steamer Amelia, and her first husband was a stewart on the steamer Julia, that blew up in Vallejo and he got killed in that. So anyway, that's how I happened to get these things .... [He talked to historian James de Abajian about Towns' grandmother. Abajian told him to look for a particular issue of a newspaper with his great-grandmother's obituary. Town looked at the microfilm and saw that his

great-grandmother died in 1895, aged 100. She was a nurse, he has a picture of her.] "She was a great big black woman, she's six feet tall." [This was his Grandma Neal.] "My father was paralyzed when I was eight-years-old. That meant I never had no more communications after ... 1907 with my dad. My other brothers---there wasn't too much love between the families. You know my brother was---they were nice to us during the earthquake. He ran a barbershop in Oakland here on 10th and Broadway."

Morton: "Now let me clarify something for a minute: when your parents married, both for the second time in 1898, did they marry here in Oakland?"

Towns: "Yes, they were married here in Oakland."

Morton: "And then where did they live then in Oakland, after their marriage?"

Towns: "Uh, Fifth and Center."

Morton: "Fifth and Center. And did the children of both your parents-"

Towns: "No, my mother's children lived with us."

Morton: "Your mother's children."

Towns: "But my father's children---like I told you, they were all men."

Morton: "Because there was such an age difference."

Towns: "...sure."

Morton: "Fifth and Center was the [address]?"

Towns: "Yeah, 1499 Fifth Street. I never forget that."

Morton: "1499 Fifth."

Towns: "See I was born in that house there in February 10th, 1899."

Morton: "You were born in that house?"

Towns: "Yes. It was a funny thing that happened: just before I retired I met a Captain in the Fire Department and he says, 'Royal, I heard you're going to take your pension.' I says, 'Yeah.' He says, 'You got a birth certificate?' I says, 'No, I haven't but I guess the records are upstairs.' He says, 'Well you better go up there and look.' He says, you won't get your pension unless you got your birth certificate.' So I went up, and I went to the Vital

Statistics Department, see got this 1899, the date. And I said, 'Geez, something's wrong, my name's not there. I was born here on that day. I know that I had a registered doctor.' And she says, 'Well look under the name of your mother and father.' And I looked and there was my name, 'Alphonsus Percival,' instead of Royal Edwards, see? I was raised Royal Edward Towns, Royal Edward Towns now. But evidently when I was born they gave me the doctor's name, Alphonsus Percival. So I understand that later, later years, my godfather was a West Indian and he named me after the crown prince of England at that time who was Edward. He later became, you know, the King of England. So ... that's how I got that name."

Morton: "...so in that household, and you say that your father was paralyzed in 1909 [sic] did that mean that your mother went to work, and did she care for all-"

Towns: "No, no. My mother never worked a day in her life, un-huh. ...see we had moved from Fifth Street then we moved to another location on Center Street. And then we moved from there to Fifth, between Fifth and Seventh Streets on Campbell. That's where we were when the earthquake was in 1906. No, my older brothers took care of my mother. My clock, my clock-"

Morton: "Oh so they were old enough to hold jobs and support the family-"

Towns: "No, they sold papers and things like that. That's all they could do."

Morton: "They were able to support the family through that?"

Towns: "Yeah. We were able to exist on it."

Morton: "And these three addresses: were these houses rented or owned by your family?"

Towns: "No, no. No, no. We rented."

Morton: "Rented, uh-hmm."

Towns: "Like an old Irish lady said [in broque] 'You're always a-moving, you're always a-moving.' [Laughs] I guess you were moving to get cheaper rent and things like that."

Morton: "So how many children were there, from ... your mother's first marriage, that lived in the household with you?"

Towns: "There was five. There was one, two, three, four boys and one girl."

Morton: "And they worked as paper boys?"

Towns: "I beg your pardon?"

Morton: "The boys took jobs as paper boys."

Towns: "Oh yes, they sold papers. And then later, shoe-shine business, things like that. They worked on the ferry boats, you know, shining shoes.... The most reliable brother, he shined shoes ... on the ferry boats and later on he went into business of his own. ...He knew how to shine a shoe. A lot of people didn't know that. Then you'd have your shoe shined by certain people, they come back to him. And then the other brothers, they sold papers. Then later Al worked in the grocery store. And Ike worked in a lot of clubs. He was a waiter in clubs. Then Richard was always, my oldest brother, was always a Pullman porter. But after 1910 Richard got married and left the rest of us to ourselves."

Morton: "And did you remain then at this house on Campbell?"

Towns: "Oh no, no, no, no. We moved from there to Seventh and Peralta. Then from Seventh and Peralta to Fifth and Henry."

Morton: "And all these moves, what was the reason behind so many...?"

Towns: "Oh better rent, better conditions. A lot of people lived in West Oakland had nice houses, had good jobs, moved different places, we'd move there, see. And we moved from there to Fifth and Campbell Street-"

Morton: "After Fifth and Henry you went to Fifth and Campbell?"

Towns: "Yes, Fifth and Campbell. On Fifth Street, near Campbell."

Morton: "And when you rented, was it just a flat in the building or did you rent the entire house?"

Towns: "Well we'd rent the entire house. Yeah. Well, we lived at Fifth and Henry it was flats, lived upstairs and downstairs. The people lived upstairs and we lived downstairs. But on 1657 Fifth Street, well we lived in a little bungalow. Then we moved from there up to 16th Street, 1912."

Morton: "So from Fifth and Campbell, where did you move then?"

Towns: "Uh Sixteenth and Campbell."

Morton: "Sixteenth and Campbell. So let's see, is the direction, is there a trend through all this? You're moving more and more-"

Towns: "What?"

Morton: "Is there a trend in this? Are you moving in one direction?"

Towns: "Well I think, you know, you got better places. We moved north there-"

Morton: "So you were moving more northerly?"

Towns: "Yes. We moved to Sixteenth Street, Sixteenth and Campbell. And then we moved from there to Sixteenth and ... Peralta."

Morton: "Sixteenth and Peralta, uh-hmm. Was there a move after that as well?"

Towns: "No, no. Oh I got married after that."

Morton: "Then you got married."

Towns: "My mother died, then I got married. My mother died there, on Sixteenth and Peralta in 1920 and then I got married."

Morton: "What year did you marry?"

Towns: "1920."

Morton: "In 1920."

Towns: "Somebody said I didn't let my mother cool off in her grave, before I got married [slight laugh]."

Morton: "Was she aware of your plans, your mother?"

Towns: "Oh she knew I was going to marry that girl. She knew that I was nice about her, yeah."

Morton: "And Royal, ... as a child what jobs did you have?"

Towns: "Well I carried papers as a kid. I had paper routes. That's why I knew so many people. I had paper routes. And then my first job was with this Marshall Calculator Machine Company. I learned the trade there. Ah, we should put that down. I learned the trade at the Marshall, I learned to be a machinist at the Marshall

Calculator Machine Co. [Morton apparently is filling out a biographical form.]"

Morton: "How long were you doing that?"

Towns: "'Bout six years there."

Morton: "For six years."

Towns: "Yeah. And then I worked in the shipyard. I was a machinist in the shipyard, in the Union Iron Works, Moore Shipyards and in Bethlehem Shipbuilding Company in Alameda."

Morton: "Union Iron Works, the Moore Shipyards and what was the other one?"

Towns: "The Bethlehem Shipyards in Alameda."

Morton: "And were other blacks employed in-"

Towns: "No. No, no, no, no.... Not in any of those places there; that's when I was a Portugee."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. I see."

Towns: "Anyway, that lasted until around 1921. In 1921 I worked for the Southern Pacific, I worked six years for the Southern Pacific on the dining cars."

Morton: "Were you cooking?"

Towns: "No, I was a waiter."

Morton: "You were a waiter."

Towns: "I was head waiter when I left there."

Morton: "Now let me back up again for a moment. Now you say you were a Portugee during those times. How did you--- how did that happen?"

Towns: "Well, these jobs I worked on, the Negores didn't have, machinists' jobs."

Morton: "But did you prove that you were Portugee? Was it an accent that you [picked up]?"

Towns: "Oh it was just mostly your nerve. I walked into a place and the guy, and one of the guys says, 'We're not hiring colored people anymore.' I says, 'Geez that's too bad. How are they going to make it?' And then the guy says, 'Did you ever work here before? ... I knew enough about it from running around with the other fellas to get by. You understand what I mean? [Morton: "Yeah."] And so,

in that way, I got there. And then of course I could always speak, you know, I always knew Spanish pretty well."

Morton: "That you had picked up from the neighborhood children?"

Towns: "From the neighborhood, my dad too."

Morton: "From your father?"

Towns: "Sure. I could always talk that, and then of course my mother would come and collect my check and there was no doubt when they see here, what I was. They didn't bother with me, see. But then the bottom fell out of the shipyards and things. And then I went to work on the dining cars."

Morton: "So in 1921, so in other words, the bottom fell out after World War II then."

Towns: "That's right."

Morton: "I mean World War I."

Towns: "And then I found out I couldn't get into the union. That was a hard job, getting in the union. I couldn't get in the union."

Morton: "Oh yeah, tell me about the Union. So there were unions involved with the shipyard?"

Towns: "That's right. I couldn't get in the union."

Morton: "Because you were black?"

Towns: "That's right. See. Couldn't get in there. Well most of the unions there, like at Marshall Calculating Machine Company, that was a Masonic Lodge. And I didn't know that you had to request to become a member. I thought that they just took you out and made you a member, see, of that union. So I didn't get that. But then when I worked for the railroad ... I had to pick it up from scratch. I didn't know nothing about waiting tables or anything like that. But as I say, I come out of there Head Waiter. I worked on some of the best trains. And when I got promoted to Head Waiter, well Mr. Pollock was head of the Southern Pacific Company and Mr. Butler was the Superintendent down there. He says, 'I get more complimentary letters about this man then any waiter that works in this system.' He says, 'One day I've got a good job for him.' And he told me when I left to go to the Fire Department, if I were you I wouldn't go.' I said, 'Well I'd like a leave of absense.' 'Well we don't issue leaves of absense.' I said, 'Well, I'd like to be able to come back if I don't make good in the Fire Department.' See, that was in 1927. So of course

thank goodness, I never did go back. But of course in 19-[he tries to think of exact date]... this must have been about 1941 or 42, or 42, sometime in there, I went down there and I made a couple of trips to Chicago. Course I was interested in this black survey of colored firefighters and that would allow me to get into Chicago and talk to those black firemen there. And also to Gary, Indiana. So some of these boys that I communicated with, were there."

Morton: "Ok, I want to get back to that again.... Now did that mean that while you were working at the shipyard, that most of the employees belonged to the union?"

Towns: "Most of them."

Morton: "And how did that affect working conditions for you, being outside of the union? Did you get the raw end of the deal, or-"

Towns: "No. No, they knew that I worked in this Marshall Calculator Machine Company and they wasn't too hard on fellas that didn't belong to the union."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. So it wasn't too bad."

Towns: "No, I didn't have a hard job there."

Morton: "And as a waiter was there ever any union organizing?"

Towns: "Oh yeah, later on we organized the Union."

Morton: "With the S.P.?"

Towns: "Yes, the Southern Pacific."

Morton: "What union was that?"

Towns: "The Dining Car Cooks and Waiters."

Morton: "Do you remember what year that [was organized]?"

Towns: "I don't remember what year that was. It was somewhere around, oh I guess '25, in there."

Morton: "And what kinds of issues were you concerned with, as a Union?"

Towns: "Well wages, the waiters were paid very poor wages. Waiters were paid very poor wages, because we made most of our money in tips. And they knew damn well if we worked for $60 a month, in those days, and we must have been making more than that in tips. See what I mean? So they just depended on tips. But I always tell them that I worked six

years with the Southern Pacific Company; it took me three years to dislike it and three years to get away from it."

Morton: "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Towns: "See? And I've had different men talk to me. In otherwords, one morning this here people think maybe I'm cuckoo or religious-crazy or something like that, but this actually happened to me. I used to work on the Breakfast train, the Padre and the Lark, they call them. One day we go to San Francisco, one day we come into Oakland. So this morning I was waiting on these four men. Now I didn't know them from, oh, that piece of furniture over there. And so this fella orders strawberries, well I brought him strawberries. I took them out, the strawberries to him, and I put the cream over it. 'Here,' he says, 'I don't like cream.' I says, 'I know you don't.' He says, 'How do you know I don't?' Well I was going to tell him, 'Well you just told me you didn't.' Well, I thought that would be it. I said, 'I guess you don't think I know you.' He says, 'No.' I says, 'You used to be my boss!' 'Oh,' he says, 'now you're all wet, I know you're wet.' I said, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute now fella. Let's digress a little. Your sister was my first schoolteacher.' And he says, 'Yeah my sister was a schoolteacher.' 'And your brother George is a County Clerk. Now do you think I know you?' He says, 'Yeah but where were you my boss [sic].' 'Marshall Calculator Machine Company.' He says, 'Well, what are you doing on here?' I said, 'Well they found out I was black.' So I said 'I had a hard job getting in the unions and things like that.' And he said, 'Is this the best you could get.' I said, '<u>No</u>.' I says, 'I took the post office examination, the police department examination, and the fire department examination.' He says, 'Which one do you want?' I says, 'I would like to have the fire department job.' 'Well' he says, 'you come and see me tomorrow up the Niles Athenian Club.' And I says, 'Geez, I won't be in town tomorrow.' He said, 'Well will you be in town the next day.' I said, 'Yes, I'll be in town the next day.' '... you come down and see me the next day.'

So I went down to the Niles Athenian Club, went in there to see Mr. Gross. 'Well Mr. Gross, here I am.' He says, 'Well wait a minute, I'm going to call the head of the Public Health and Safety over there. And so we called 'em up, Frank Corbett was the man in charge. Says, 'Hello Frank? he says. 'This is Charley Gross,' he says. 'I've got a very good friend of mine,' he says, 'used to work for me. And he's got a family and everything and he's taking a job [application] at the fire department. I'd like to know when he's going to get appointed.' So, there was a little lapse, 'Oh,' he says, 'on February the 14th. Huh? All right,' he says, 'now you take care of him. That's my boy!' [laughs]. So that was the end of that. So I got my job at the Fire

Department. By just remembering---I didn't remember, but something brought that out to me, at that particular time."

Morton: "Oh, that's wonderful."

Towns: " I don't know if I'm physic or what it is but it was something. And I know I've listened to a couple of church sermons that's telling about different things that happen to people. I said, 'Well that's what happened to me.'

Morton: "Amazing. Well let me ask you then: Does that mean that your work as a machinist in the shipyards, and then your work as a S.P. waiter, ... does that mean you were making better wages in the shipyards than you were as a waiter?"

Towns: "Oh yes, yes, yes...."

Morton: "Was there a big discrepency?"

Towns: "That's right. Not a big discrepency but I was making more than what I made there in the shipyards. ... Six twenty, I think, was the union scale."

Morton: "So the problem came when the bottom fell out of the shipyard business then what was available to you. What could you have done apart from being a S.P. waiter?"

Towns: "Well, one of the fellas I worked with said, 'Geez, you'd make a good dining car waiter.' He said, 'You're just the type, and so forth, so on.' I had to get a job. My wife's got a young baby there to take care of so. So then I went on down there and I got into that. And then in the course, during the time that I was a waiter I studied salesmanship. I wasn't just an ordinary waiter, I didn't just bring the food to you, I practically sold you the food. And gave you the food the way you wanted it. And you wrote down what you wanted and I stopped and I questioned you, asked you these things. Maybe you had a salad, 'Do you want your salad before your entree or would you like it along with it?' Or so forth and so on. See?"

Morton: "That must have been very difficult work."

Towns: "Oh yeah. I had certain people on there, 'I want, I want that waiter there. I want him.' And this trip, this trip I took back East there in the late 40s, you know, I told you I went down there, I made a couple of trips. Because Mr. Butler down there always did like me. He always told me if there's anything you want, Royal, you come down and I'll do it for you. So they arranged for me to make this trip. And I told them why I wanted it. And so anyway, to make a long story short, there was a lady and these two

fellas sat down. And so this waiter next to me, 'Hey boy, you've got a pretty good table there. That lady pays two dollars and those fellas pay a dollar a piece. I said, 'Ok, thanks.'

So anyway as the meal ended up I said, 'Did you enjoy your meal.' She says, 'Yes.' I says, 'You know why you enjoyed your meal?' Says, 'No, I don't know.' 'Because you had a waiter that was interested in you. ...he saw that you got what you wanted. And that's my job, I'm here to see that you get what's right. It's not just what you order.' So then the next morning this fella [waiter] saw this lady come in [Towns says this eagerly] 'Sit here, I want you to sit here!' She says, 'No I want to sit over here, this waiter's interested in me!' [laughs]."

Morton: "Well Mr. Towns, being as popular then, you must have made good money in tips. Were you able to keep the tips that you made? You didn't have to split them with the other waiters?"

Towns: "Oh no, no, no, no, no. I kept my own tips. Of course, this is another story. I had always been taught from the time [I was a child] to bless my food when I sat down to eat. And these waiters used to see me, and they used to laugh at me. One day one other waiter said, [Towns says this with distinct accent] 'I'm going to bless my food too, this guy's having lots of luck making money!' [laughs hard]. So I don't know, it may have paid off in the long run...."

Morton: "So when the union was finally organized for the dining car cooks and waiters, did that improve the situation...?"

Towns: "Well it gave us a spokesman in the office over there, in San Francisco. It gave us a spokesman, it did help. But I left right after that, see? And they're still in existence today.... [He notes that he has arranged to bring down some pictures to the meetings of the retired group.]

Morton: "...so that's how you got your job in the Fire Departemnt, was through your-"

Towns: "Well how I got my job at the Fire Department is another story. I was working on the Sunset Limited, running between San Francisco and New Orleans and I was on there, one day, and I saw a fella, George Allen. And George was a fireman. I said, 'Hello George, how are you.' 'Fine.' He says, 'Well what are you doing, Royal?' I says, 'I'm working on the railroad.' He says, 'You can't make much money there. Why don't you take the fire department examination? It pays $200 a month.' 'Ooh ...that sounds

pretty good.' Course that's $200 in a lump, rather than maybe one trip I'd make fifty, or sixty dollars, and another trip, maybe $70 or $80. So forth, so, according to the people that you had. People tipped according to their experience and the manner in which you waited on them. And I say, 'Gee George, I don't think I'm smart enough for this.' 'Well come on, we'll train you for it.' So I went on with them and I started training ... so I got the job."

Morton: "Was this man George Somebody you knew as a child?"

Towns: "This is Charlie [sic], he was with the 12th engine fire department. So we studied together and of course, like I said, I made one mistake is when I made my application. I said I noticed a colored fire station and if I got appointed it would be my ambition to become an officer in that fire house, which I eventually did. Course, it took me fifteen years to get it, but anyway, that was my ambition. But I couldn't get it because they wouldn't let me go. I had the ability but no, no, they marked me down. I had good marks, I know it was good marks. I made good marks on the written but the oral examination, put the thumbs down on me, you see. I know that because---well just recently in my experiences, this boy who is the Chief of the Fire Department now, he was one of my boy scouts. I quit the fire department a month early so he'd get a lieutenant's job in the fire department. And now, he's the Chief of the Fire Department, black man.

And, I went to his reception and two white fellas came up and they kissed me, both of them were battalion chiefs. I said, 'Hey, I'm not a homosexual, why kiss me?' I says, 'Why all this personal infatuation?' So one fella told me, he says 'You know Royal, you taught me something in the fire department that I've used all through the fire department.' And I said, 'What was that?' ...And he said, 'That's reflections.' And I said, 'Well what did I tell you about that?' 'Well' he said, 'when we first came here we were the first whites that were mixed in with a black company. And you told me, 'Now everything in life is a reflection. If you're nice to people, they're nice to you. If you're nasty to people, they're nasty to you. And so forth and so on. Anyway,' he says, 'I used that all throughout the fire department.' This other guy, he's a battalion chief also, he was one of the four guys that was named the Chief of the Fire Department. And he kissed me. And I said, 'What's your story?' And he says 'Well Royal, you gave me the best advice of any officer that I ever had in the Fire Department.' I said, 'What did I tell you?' 'You told me to keep my head in the books.' So that's the way, they reflected.

Then of course there were lots of things that happened in the department that were funny. Like we used to have all-

white officers out there. And some of these guys would get to the officers and say, 'Look out for Towns, he's a wise guy.' Or some other thing, or he likes to argue, or something like that. So this guy, I think his name was Cunningham, he came in there. And we used to have assignment drills that would be an imaginary fire in a certain district. Certain companies would go and there were certain rules regarding the response of things to these different places. So I pegged out something and he says 'That's wrong.' 'Ok.' So he says, 'Why did you peg that way?' 'Well you said you didn't want any arguments.' [He continues this narrative. He was actually proved correct in this incident. He felt that the other guys "downed him."]

Morton: "Well, were you the first black in the fire department?"

Towns: "No, no. No, no. We were all blacks in this department, but he was a white fella. He used to send white officers over there."

Morton: "So there were other blacks in this department already when you-"

Towns: "Oh yes. I was the 13th black appointment in the Fire Department. We had a company, was all black in that company. They were all black men in that company."

Morton: "Oh I see ...."

Towns: [Mr. Towns reiterates the point that the officer thought he wasn't applying the rules to this training maneuver. Actually Towns had been taught in school to follow the procedures his way. He talks about how he was able to solve hydraulic problems... he worked these out by using mathematical formulas.] I think back about those days, I think that---Sam come up under different conditions than I did. Sam didn't work with an all-black company where they were all afraid that one guy was going to get ahead of one another. That is what I think was troubling in a house of all blacks. We were all scared that one of us was going to be boss."

Morton: "But you're the one that really broke that...."

Towns: "... I broke the ice. I was appointed Chiefs Operator. That put me into a white company. And that started it. And then they come to find out that, the guys found out there, that my eyes also, when they looked at, when you saw a good-looking woman they didn't see anything different than what they saw. And then they found out that I had an appetite: that I ate the same things that they did. They found out that I had likes and dislikes. And like I told them, there's one thing you and I got in common: and we

don't like to have our feelings hurt. So think when you talk to me. See?

Then the next thing you know, I got appointed to Engineer. Then I was the only colored engineer I think that they had in a white house, in those days. And then when I got appointed Lieutenant and they started breaking us all up, they put us into a house where we were all mixed together. We had a colored Captain, and I was the Lieutenant and then they had a white Lieutenant, all in that same house. But, I was always a fighter for what I wanted. I didn't ask them for it. The Captain, this colored fella, I told him, he said well, 'I don't know.' [Towns answered] 'Well, I'm going to get it.' So then I'd put in for it, I'd get it. See, but I was always a fighter."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. From the very beginning, it sounds like [slight laugh]."

Towns: "That's right! [He mentions the fact that he had a fist fight with another firefighter.] Like this fella Bash was the Assistant Chief and Wilds was the supply man. And Bash says, 'Well we're going to run him out of there in two weeks.' He says, 'Oh no, you're not going to run him out of there.' He says, 'You might run some of them other guys that work out there on 22 engine out, you know, but you ain't going to run Towns out. Towns [is] one of those mixed-blood guys and he'll fight, he'll fight! So that's why they didn't fool with Towns, they knew that Towns would fight. See?"

Morton: "So how long then did you stay with the fire department?"

Towns: "I stayed with the fire department 35-years."

Morton: "Thirty-five years."

Towns: "Yep. From 1927 to 1962."

Morton: "And ... so you were supporting your wife and one child-"

Towns: "Two children, two children-"

Morton: "And then you had two more."

Towns: "Two children, yes, yes."

Morton: "Are they're three total children?"

Towns: "Yeah, ... when I went to the fire department, I had three."

Morton: "Oh, by the time you were in the Fire Department."

Towns: "I had three children, yes."

Morton: "Well it must have been nice for your wife, because when you were working for the S.P. you'd be gone for long periods."

Towns: "Yes, I was gone. The Fire Department I was only gone ... every other night, I was in the firehouse. And then it got so we spent two nights at home and one night in the firehouse. But those conditions I worked for. When they were getting beat in their parts of town, down in West Oakland, we put the thing over. So at this reception ... one of the Assistant Chiefs, a white fella, he introduced me to a fella. He said, 'This is Lieutenant Towns, he's responsible for a lot of our good conditions that exist here in the Fire Department today: the pension going on to the widows, and the working system.' See? So I did a lot of work. Toward the end, the Fire Department wanted me to go down to West Oakland, I wouldn't go down there. So the Chief asked me, Chief Sweeney, he says, 'Why don't you go down there?' I said, 'Well I can't go down there because a lot of those fellas there, they're political bosses, they'll ask me ... [to] show me a black man in one of these houses down here and I can't show it to them.' So I said, 'Send me out to Brookfield Village or someplace like that.' That was one of the last campaigns that I was in. But then when I retired, this Chief Sweeney, he liked me a lot, he said, 'One thing about you Roy, you tell what you think about.' And he says, 'A lot of these guys, I just give them the badge and wish them well. But you, you retire---you come in my office, I want to sit down and talk to you.'"

Morton: "They learned respect for you. Mr. Towns, I'm wondering, during the 20s when you first began, well when you were working as an S.P. waiter and also with the Fire Department, how much involvement did you have with the black nightlife that was happening along Seventh Street, with the jazz?"

Towns: "Oh, I never bothered with that. I never bothered with that. The money that they spent down there, I tell them, that was 'blood money.' The people weren't making the money but still and yet they could go and spend all that money down there at Slim Jenkins and those various places that they had down there."

End of Tape 1, Side 1

Tape 1, Side 2

Towns: "...you know, doctors, lawyers and things around there, they could afford it."

Morton: "So when you say 'blood money,' in other words it's the money that they needed to survive on."

Towns: "They needed to support their family with, yeah. Yeah they was down there blowing big shots down there, buying booze and things like that. Oh I'd buy a bottle of booze to take home. You know, three dollars, something like that. It was cheap those days. And we'd have our shots at home. But I didn't [?] want to show off, going down there."

Morton: "What kind of socializing did you do?"

Towns: "Oh we had our social groups. Well, my wife's club, her club is called the Junior 500 Club. Those women still exist today [slight laugh]."

Morton: "And that's a social club?"

Towns: "That's a social club there-"

Morton: "Was that interracial?"

Towns: "I beg your pardon?"

Morton: "Was that a mixed group?"

Towns: "No. Well, all different groups of colored people, from New Orleans and Louisiana. The Louisiana group there we met."

Morton: "Oh, but there were all black then?"

Towns: "All black, all black. And my association was with the Masonic Lodge. I spent quite a bit of time with the Masonic Lodge. I was a Master of one of the lodges, I worked my way around. And, like I said, I was editor of that magazine for ten years."

Morton: "Yeah, where was the lodge located?"

Towns: "Thirty-first and San Pablo. Thirtieth and San Pablo."

Morton: "And the blacks had their own-"

Towns: "Yeah, had their own hall. Yes, uh-hmm."

Morton: "Yeah, cause that's interesting to me. So there were black Masons and there were white Masons and they stayed apart."

Towns: "Yeah, there's a split because of color, just like there's a difference between you and I because you're white and I'm black, as far as associations are concerned. But when you look back into the annals of the Masonic organizations, I was with a Masonic historian in (this is a white fella), in Boston. And they took me to the white Masonic temple. And we went through there and down in the trophy room there's a great big picture of who? Prince Hall. Prince Hall is the founder of black Masons. So he said that the Grand Lodge in Massachusetts, if it hadn't been for one or two fellas, would have recognized us. Because he knew that we were just as regular as they were. They knew that our charters came from the same places."

[Interview is temporarily interrupted.]

Towns: [Relates a story about visiting his son at the Brooklyn shipyards. Towns' access was blocked by an Irish watchman who spoke with a heavy brogue. Towns countered by speaking brogue which he learned from his Irish neighbors in West Oakland. The watchman answered him, 'Pat come here: take this Irishman down to the boat!' After visiting the ships he struck up another conversation with the guard and apparently convinced him that he was 'black Irish.']

"Course down there in West Oakland with all of those kids and things, just come over from the Old Country, like Neil O'Boyles. Say Neil, 'When did you come over?' 'I come over Thursday' [said with a brogue]. And you know, you pick up a lot of that stuff down there."

Interviewer 2: "You've got a great accent! You should go into acting."

Towns: "Well it's so funny that, that when I was a kid we did have a fella, Muso O'Brien. Muso was a blackamoor. And he traced his family back to the Spanish Armada: they were Moors. And they settled in there. And so it was always funny to hear Muso O'Brien ... talk [laughs]. But then one of my best friends was Tom Mulcane and Tom's folks were from the old sod. And we'd go over there. The old man would tell us all about the banshees and the different things like that, you know? And his experiences over there in Ireland. And he had a brogue a mile long. We'd talk about dogs [pronounced dawg.] A dog was a 'dawg.' [Laughs]. "

[Another interviewer is briefly present and wonders whether Mr. Towns has talked about a certain subject. Interview is again temporarily stopped.]

Morton: "Mr. Towns, I'd like to go back to Prince Hall. Could you tell me a little bit about---he was the founder now of black Masonry."

Towns: "Yeah, of black Masonry. Yes. ...I can let you have a book that has more on that than I can tell you."

Morton: "About the Masons?"

Towns: "Yeah, if you'd like to have it...."

Morton: "Ok. So, and then were there other sort of social organizations that you were involved in? Your wife had that club, and you're involved with the-"

Towns: "No, no. The Masons, mostly. And retired railroad men."

Morton: "Retired railroad men?"

Towns: "Yeah, retired railroad men."

Morton: "Now is that different that the 'Old Rail Club'.... Are you familiar with that group?"

Towns: "No, I think that that's an off-spring of this."

Morton: "That this is the larger group of retired railroad men."

Towns: "Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Retired railroad men. I think that-"

Morton: "And is this group still around?"

Towns: "Well they had an exhibit here, a while back...."

Morton: "At the Oakland Library?"

Towns: "No here."

Morton: "Here at the house! [Cameron-Stanford House. The exhibit was on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Mr. Towns has a few pictures from that era that were in exhibit; also he has others at the African American Museum....] "And was there a church that your family belonged to in West Oakland?"

Towns: "Well, the Cooper AME Zion Church was my dad's church. In fact, my grandfather brought the AME Zion Church which that's a part of, to California. But I have never been an actual church member, belong to any church. I go to church, I go to this church over here: the Unity Church of Christianity.... Are you familiar with the Unity books?"

Morton: "No, I've heard of them...."

Towns: "You've never seen any of those? They're very fine reading. And it's nondenominational. Jews come there, and Catholics and [chuckles] everything else.... [He talks briefly about the Unity philosophy which is somewhat akin to that of the Christian Scientists.] "When you look at a Chinaman and you want to get mad at him. If you're truthful to yourself, well he's the same as you are, except your facial makeup is different. Or Hindu or Jew, anything. And they believe in a supreme being....

I go to different churches .... I go to Mass, Catholic Mass. I've gone to, well a Jewish group and different other groups. They're almost all the same ...."

Morton: "And now when you married, and you moved out of the house at 16th and Peralta, where did you move to at that point?"

Towns: "Oh, on 27th Street .... Twenty-seventh between Grove and West."

Morton: "How long were you at that address?"

Towns: "Oh, I was there until, oh, let's see 1929. I guess 1929. Then we moved over to 35th and Grove. I bought a place there on 35th Street. And I lived there ... until they built the freeway and the freeway cause me to move. [State of California bought his new house. He has been there for 30 years.]

Morton: "And where did you do most of your shopping? Was your wife ... responsible for the shopping?"

Towns: "Well Safeway, we had Safeway Groceries. My wife did most of the shopping.... And then downtown, downtown at Washintgon Market in the old days. The Washington Market and the Free Market, the Tenth Street Market."

Morton: "Do you remember where your mother used to shop?"

Towns: "Well my mother used to shop mostly down at Sixth Street Market. Those days, they called it the Sixth Street Market, a free market, on Sixth Street. ... even in later days my wife and I went to that Sixth Street Market. We'd go down there, and of course my brothers, their names were all Clark. They were all Clarks. And 'Hey Clark how are you?' 'Fine, fine.' 'What, what do you want?' I said, 'My wife wants three pounds of those sweet potatoes.' Three pounds for 15 to 20 cents, something like that. This guy would go get a great big sack. And he said, 'Three pounds, huh?' And he starts putting that stuff in here [laughs]. Next thing you know, he handed me this bag. I could just barely pick it up, see? But that was some of the West Oakland boys that I was raised with. They didn't care about

that.... [In later years the Towns shopped at first Piggly Wiggly and then Safeway, always in Oakland.]

Morton: [She asks him about the Depression. Towns had a good job throughout and thus wasn't adversely affected. He made $200 a month at the Fire Department. He went to the Fire Department in 1927. He bought his home in 1929.]

"Was there an affect that it had on West Oakland, generally, that you're aware of?"

Towns: "After I once got away from West Oakland there, say in 1912, I got away from the bowels of West Oakland. And I never went down there much for anything after that, except for friends that I knew, or some occasion that carried me down there. But the commissary was in West Oakland, where we shipped out of there for the Southern Pacific dining cars. That's the only thing that brought me down in there."

Morton: "What would you consider West Oakland? What were the [boundaries]?"

Towns: "West Oakland, I considered, was anything west of Center Street."

Morton: "West of Center Street? And why was Center Street the division?"

Towns: "Well Center Street was the east end of my operations. But West Oakland was considered from Market Street south, Market Street to the West of Market. That's where the guys got that West of Market Street boys."

Morton: "Uh-huh. That was the more officially accepted. But the West of Center was in your sort of circle."

Towns: "In my circle, that's right. That's right. As I stated before, my circle of friends down there were mostly kids that we played baseball with. De Fremery Park was the center, see? From 1912 on, from 1912 de Fremery Park and playground. I was very active in athletic activities over there, see? Because I moved to 16th Street in 1912."

Morton: "So that was the closest sort of playground, or park area?"

Towns: "...that was the <u>only</u> playground."

Morton: "In West Oakland? That was the only one?"

Towns: "That was the only playground, that's right. In fact that was the only playground west of the lake."

Morton: "I read something, I think it was in the West of Market Boys Journal about Father McNally getting help from, I think it was even from the Italians in the scavenger business, to help him ...fill in an area for a park. He created some sort of baseball park."

Towns: "I don't know nothing about that. I don't know, he might have got some money. There was two or three places where they played baseball, where there was big openings. One was there at Twelfth and Union, Twelfth and Poplar Street, Union Street where the shredded wheat company [is].... They used to play ball, they used to call that the 'Oak Ball.'"

Morton: "Oak Ball?"

Towns: "Oak Ball. O-A-K B-A-L-L. The oak trees, they had them little balls on them, you know. Besides the acorns."

Morton: "...Was it called the 'Oak Ball Park?'"

Towns: "Oak Ball, Oak Ball is what they used to call that.... That Oak Ball Park."

Morton: "Was it owned by the Nabisco?"

Towns: "No. It wasn't owned by anybody. It was just vacant see, and the kids used to play ball there."

Morton: "So these were all sort of just vacant lots?"

Towns: "That's right. Vacant lots. Then there was a vacant lot at 16th and Willow."

Morton: "Uh-huh. So was baseball a big sport then, when you were growing up?"

Towns: "Yeah baseball was. Football, nobody cared about football. Only the Mics who came over from the Old World played soccer. And the other place was at 9th and Pine, Pine Street. Then there was another one at First and Adeline, and another one at Fifth and Kirkham."

Morton: "So that's quite a few then."

Towns: "Yeah! And then of course the kids, we used to play in Longs lot, Longs lot was on Seventh Street, between Campbell and Willow."

Morton: "Just another vacant lot then?"

Towns: "Long, it's another vacant lot there. Long was the butcher, one of the butchers in West Oakland."

Morton: "Between Campbell and Willow.... Were these unofficial baseball teams...?"

Towns: "Unofficial. Just kids teams, just kids teams. That's all. Yeah. Then of course later on, when the City bought DeFermery's residence down there, then DeFermery Park became the DeFermery Playground team. But we never had uniforms or things like that."

Morton: "But it was an official recreation center?"

Towns: "That's right, recreation center. Even that was sort of a gangland affair. If you were Portugee or Italian, and lived up in that district, you got to play on the things. But if you came from some other place and you didn't play, they had gangs of kids up there that would fight you off. Now when I get up there and get on the things, they start after me and the guys say, 'Hey, leave him alone. That's Ike Clark's brother.' My brother was a tough guy [laughs]. See what I mean?"

Morton: "So, does that mean, at all these different vacant lots-"

Towns: "No, I'm speaking of DeFermery Park."

Morton: "...oh this is just DeFermery Park."

Towns: "DeFermery Park. They had the rings and the apparatus where kids could get on, slides and slide down the pole. And they had the rings where you could swing from one to another, and things like that."

Morton: "And were you saying that the kids formed gangs?"

Towns: "Oh there was a gangland ... the group that lived in that neighborhood."

Morton: "Around DeFermery?"

Towns: "That's right...."

Morton: "Were they made up of one group-"

Towns: "No, no, no, no. Made all different groups. All different groups. You could even be a black guy in that group. And there was. Yeah. But outside of that, I can't think of anything else."

Morton: "Were there other games that were played?"

Towns: "There's soccer, soccer. Yes, we played soccer. We had a soccer field there at DeFermery Park ...."

Morton: "And what about boxing? I understand that that was a big sport in West Oakland."

Towns: "Oh boxing later on, in later days, they had boxing down there. There was a West Oakland arena, that was at Eighth and Pine. Then they had Pat McClane's Gymnasium, that was at Fifth and Union, where a lot of them used to train. And what else: the Aloha Club, at Eighteenth and Peralta."

Morton: "And did Link Dennis have a place where they trained?"

Towns: "Link Dennis had a place there. The Olympic Saloon."

Morton: "That was the name of his place?"

Towns: "Jack Johnson used to train there."

Morton: "So who were the big West Oakland boxers?"

Towns: "Oh gee, Lee Johnson, Battling Ortega, Pete Tavis, oh let's see .... It's all in there .... In here there's a list of the ... old cards of the guys that fought down in West Oakland. Bob McAlister, Pete Tavis—"

Morton: "Did many local boys make good through their sort of athletic-"

Towns: "Yeah, yeah. Cecil Thompson became the welter-weight champion of the world.... [He reads from an article, 'Do You Remember?' There was a Railroad Market at Eleventh and Wood, also a beer garden at Seventh and Bay Street. Dalton's Pharmery [sic] at the foot of Tenth. Slattery Brothers Store in the 'triangle,' 7th and 8th and Goss. The Old Chicago Market at Sixteenth Street, 'Tin Can Alley.' He lists more businesses. He also names families, including names of Italian garbagemen. First dump was at 22nd and West Grand; kids used to tie their wagons to the back of garbage wagons and ride to the 14th Street wharf. (Ed. Note: Hopefully this article is in the collection of the Oakland History Room.) He reads a letter from Leroy Johnson who sent money for the West Oakland Old-timers Reunion. Mr Towns goes through his collection of papers.]

Morton: "Did you ever do any boxing?"

Towns: "I used to box. My mother would never let me---my mother says, 'I know too many fighters. And the good Lord don't give you much brains and they don't need to go in there and get their own knocked out.' I was pretty good.... [He finds an article about famous West Oakland families.

They used to have Four Round games. He reads through a list of names of fighters; clearly a multi-ethnic group. A lot of Irish and Portuguese. Mr. Towns remembers running into the Oakland Tribune sports editor. He mentioned to him about these fight cards.]

Morton: "And then another activity, which we were also talking about earlier, was swimming down at the estuary."

Towns: "Oh the estuary? Oh yeah, ...famous names from the estuary: Ralph Kindrick was the Pacific Coast backstroke champion. Ralph was the one who taught me all I know about swimming."

Morton: "I was going to ask you. So you learned to swim in the estuary?"

Towns: "Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm."

Morton: "What was the water quality like...?"

Towns: "Uh, it was good enough for us kids. You couldn't pay me to swim down there now [slight laugh]. No, because the sewage all ran out in the estuary. At high tide, you never noticed the difference. But when the tide come low, and it started coming out, it brought all this sewage along with it, ...the defensive way of swimming." [Ed. note: Mr. Towns is probably referring to the joke about the breast stroke, in which you 'push' the stuff away from your face. West Oakland-born Ben Albanese made the same remark in his interview when he recalled swimming in local waters.]

Morton: "So even then, even when you were little, that was the situation."

Towns: "Yeah...."

Morton: "Was there much of a beach?"

Towns: "Oh, nice beach, nice beach. Cause you see what happened was, at one time the estuary ran up almost to Fifth Street. And that was all filled in down there, from time to time filled in, to make the Southern Pacific shipyards. And then they filled in down there to make the Moore Shipyard. And then they filled in up to the tracks, and finally they filled in up to Fifth Street. All that's made land. ...[if] one of those little grains of sand could talk, it would tell you say 'Hey! Buddy, I was once a part of San Francisco Bay' [laughs]."

Morton: "So it was actually a sandy beach down there?"

Towns: "Yes, it was sandy. Yes, uh-huh. And then where we used to swim, there was a bulkhead there. And that bulkhead served the purpose for us to put our clothes up and-"

Morton: "You were skinny dipping?"

Towns: "Oh yes, skinny dipping. Well we didn't start putting on bathing suits until they started anchoring yachts around there. They started anchoring yachts and then we had to put on bathing suits. Smith Brothers had a sale, bathing suits, ten cents. Just trunks. And then we went up there, yeah. Course then we'd go around to the bath houses: Piedmont Baths and Sutro Baths in San Francisco, Lurline Baths."

Morton: "What were those like? ... was it hot water?"

Towns: "Hot water, yes."

Morton: "Was it mineral baths?"

Towns: "Sutro Baths had a variety of tanks. They had one tank there that was cold. It stored the water outside in a pool outside. And whenever they filled that tank they filled that tank from that. And then they had other ones that was so hot that it was almost like swimming in a bowl of hot soup. Then Piedmont Baths-"

Morton: "Did you go very much to Piedmont Baths?"

Towns: "Oh yeah, I used to go. I used to go quite a bit to Piedmont Baths. Yeah, I used to go."

Morton: "So was that more therapeutic than---you couldn't really swim, could you?"

Towns: "Oh you could swim in the Piedmont Baths. Piedmont had a little place they used to call the 'soup bowl.' You got in there, and the steam was turned on into that water and it's just like taking a steam bath."

Morton: "And would you go---would there be parts for men and parts for women...?"

Towns: "No, no, no, no, We all get in the same soup pot. Yeah. But the first time I knew prejudice was when I was practicing for that team. I used to go with all these kids---these kids would take me. I'd go with these Italians and Portugees, and some of them were blacker than I am. And there never was any question about it. But one time, I went to Surf Beach Park in Alameda and the fella pointed out the group. He says 'You can go in and you can go in and you can go in. And he pointed at me and he says, 'But you can't go in.' So one of these little Portugee boys spoke up. He

said, 'Why can't he, he's my cousin.' So he says, 'Oh, he's your cousin?' 'Yeah' so I went in. So hell, after that I never had no more trouble [laughs]. ... but the average West Oakland colored boys didn't do that, because they didn't run around with the Portugees. I ran around with Portugees for a long time. In fact at this McClymond's Reunion here, a couple of months ago, I went to that and a lot of guys you didn't know. But you saw on the badge what their name was. Then you spoke to them in their native language. If it was Greek, 'Hey [Towns says a Greek surname]. [He repeats this for Portuguese, Italian, Spanish.] So it was funny. Then you got around and the guy's name was 'O'Toole.' And then I says [in brogue] 'O'Toole, did you ever learn how to speak English?' [Laughs]. It was funny.... But that's the way you were raised down there.

And then the kids... wherever you were at 12 o'clock, that's where you went to eat. And bread had all kinds of names."

Morton: "You mean, you'd go to that kid's house?"

Towns: "Yeah, you went to that kid's house. If you was up in front of his house at 12 o'clock his mother [would say], 'Hey come on boys, come on in. Have something to eat.' You go and eat in there. Linguisa (Portuguese sandwich), salami (Italian stuff), everything, spaghetti."

Morton: "So then the neighbors looked out for each other."

Towns: "Yeah, there was no animosity."

Morton: "Was there crime, in West Oakland?"

Towns: "Yes there was crimes, there was some groups that were criminals. Like I often remember a group down there and the name's Reposa, well this boy was always in jail. He was a chronic thief. But his mother'd just say, 'Well he's a good boy. He's a good boy....' Then there was Maloney: Maloney ended up on the gallows, over at San Quentin. But he was always a crime, thief, stealing things."

Morton: "But ... yeah, that's what I was going to say. Was there much burglary, or-"

Towns: "Not much burglary, because people down there didn't have nothing! No, you left your house open. You never locked your house. ...but these kids, like Maloney, he got hanged: they found him stealing some money or he killed somebody, some place for money. And Delushy [?] that got hanged down there, he killed a guy who took his diamonds away to give to his girlfriend. And this girlfriend, they found her with these diamonds, and they wonder how she got them, poor girl, from West Oakland down there. How did she

get the diamonds...? ...down there in West Oakland most crimes were vagrancy, men and women, see? Or a white woman associating with a colored man. Or something else like that."

Morton: "...in the West Oakland area, ... were there families who had a lot more money than other families?"

Towns: "Oh yes, oh yes, yes, yes. There were people down there, like the Aikins, the father was a big merchant. And there was that big residence there at Seventh and Center Street, for years, the McDermott Property. And of course across the street the Moynihans. Of course the McDermotts were the 'lace curtain Irish' and the Moynihans were the 'shanty Irish.' But the shanty Irish, they had a big paper business and things like that."

Morton: "But were they mixed in, or was there a [?] section?"

Towns: "Well they all lived in that same section, together. But they didn't associate together. See? Yeah. So there were lots---oh there were Motts, and Meeses. The same Meeses, well one of their relatives is on that committee with [President] Reagan [Ed Meese] and he was the District Attorney here. But the Meese's had a big piece of property down there at Thirteenth and Willow Street. And then the Conigs [?] and the Motts. Oh, there was lots of them...."

Morton: "And who were the poor people? Who were the real poor people...?"

Towns: "Well the average person down there, you'd have to start naming everybody! People were just working. They had jobs, some people. I remember when the Lorries got an automobile down there: that's the first family in West Oakland that had an automobile... in that part of West Oakland. Down in the other part of West Oakland, when I lived there, Peterson got an automobile. Ever since there was automobiles, Peterson had an automobile. Then the Traceys, they were painters.... They made good money. The McAlisters were plumbers and things like that. They made good money."

Morton: "So maybe there were sort of two economic levels?"

Towns: "Yeah, yeah. They recognized one another. Like I was telling you, I was telling this fella out at Bishop O'Doud School there about people down there. There were different classes in each national group, see? [....] A lot of those people down there had little businesses and things like that. They got in. Joey Oaks's family, they had grocery stores and the Driscolls. Hansen's had a big saloon up there at Tenth and Webster. That's in the days

when Tenth and Webster was in the part of Oakland. On Fourteenth Street, you were out in the country. And if you went east of Harrison Street you went out in the country. The people had nice jobs. A lot of them were barbers, like Justil Baraz [?] was a barber and Freddie Luz, took over the barber business from him. And there was Frank Henry, had a big barber shop down there. And oh man Levis, had barbers."

Morton: "And would these all be on Seventh Street then?"

Towns: "On Seventh Street."

Morton: "The majority of these businesses?"

Towns: "Yeah. Well Teaques Saloon and Brakenfelters [?] And then Brakenfelter opened up the Acme Brewery there on Seventh Street. The Rosheeney's had a grocery store, the Hays's and the Haushildts had the plumbing place. Now those people were always in the better, circumstances than the average poor person in West Oakland. And the McCanns. And Schaefers. Oh geez I could name hundreds of them. The Ibsens. Captain Ibsen, he was a sailing man.... And they lived in West Oakland until I guess he made enough money to get out of West Oakland. Mabel Ibsen was a beautiful girl. I wonder what ever became of her? Mabel and [?], they were nice-looking girls."

Morton: "What about moving out of the area? When people started to move out of the area what were the reasons, or where did they move? Or did they move as groups?"

Towns: "Well they moved for better living conditions. A lot of those people lived in shantys down there. And they got a chance. You find, that in life, it's a whole---the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. You know? But there is a group of the poor that they start to get richer, they move out of the neighborhood. Now suppose now for instance, you lived in a real nice house here. But you see some place oh maybe over in Lafayette that you want, that's better than that. You move over to Lafayette. Some other person, looked at your house [admires it and they move from the slums to this new house.]

And everybody wasn't welcome into every neighborhood that they moved into. If you moved into a neighborhood, 'Oh here comes some Slavs,' or 'Here comes some Dago,' or 'Here comes some Portugee' and so and so. And blacks the same doggone way. But they learned to live with each other. There was a time here when the black man couldn't get a piece of property in a certain place because of written covenants. People said Well we'll not show our property to blacks, and that was that. [He mentions his Uncle Fred who moved from Fifth and Lewis out to East 18th Street. Mr. Towns only owed $500 on his home in 1935. His brother paid off the

balance for him, out of the blue. Also, Royal's other Towns brother died and apparently left him some money. This brother had owned the northeast corner of Moss Avenue and Broadway, now MacArthur and Broadway. They sold the property in 1912 and moved to Allensworth, California. Thus they were one of the pioneer families of this all-black settlement. Mr. Towns notes that it is time for him to go. He notes that his wife is not well.]

End of formal interview

[Interview with Royal Towns by Pamela Morton and _____ for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project. This tape appears to be a follow-up session to the original interview. Transcription April 1996 by Karana Hattersley-Drayton for Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center, for the Cypress Freeway Replacement Project, Caltrans.]

[Tape is not cued up. Interview begins as Mr. Towns is repeating an anecdote about a woman who slaps a man for being fresh. Mr. Towns also apparently has historic materials---newspaper articles, photographs and a list of West Oakland nicknames---which he refers to in this portion of the tape.]

Royal Towns: "Anyway, what I started to tell you, one of these here, that has all of the nicknames [from West Oakland. He searches through his papers.] Well anyway, this fella calls me up and he says, 'Elmo _____ died.' I said, 'Gee, that's too bad.' And he says, 'Yeah, he had 52 grandchildren.' ... and he says 'My brother-in-law also died.' And I says 'Oh, I knew Edgar very well.' [Mr. Towns continues to look for his list of nicknames.] And so then I called up Tony and I told Tony that this boy had died, and also Edgar Benson. He says, 'Geez, I don't remember Edgar Benson.' 'Oh,' I said, 'sure, you know his uncle used to run the blacksmith shop there at 7th and Campbell Street.' And he says, 'No, I don't remember.' And I says, 'You know Sanddab!' 'Yeah, I know Sanddabs! But he didn't know Edgar Benson, see what I mean?' [He looks through his papers for this list of nicknames and finds it.] ...there's all the nicknames of the kids in the community, that we knew."

Interviewer 1: "Now were any of these tied to racial or ethnic things, or just probably unrelated?"

Towns: "Oh no, listen, when you speak of West Oakland, West Oakland was interracial."

Interviewer 1: "I know, that's why I was curious whether it did get reflected here."

Towns: "No, no, no. There's no names there that would make any of them feel bad, such as nigger, or dago or Portugee or something like that."

Interviewer 1: "Here's one: watermelon."

Towns: "Well watermelon, his name was Jesse Mattis and they called him watermelon because his head looked like a watermelon!"

Interviewer 1: "Oh! No kidding. Now how about 'Moracco'?"

Towns: "Morocco? Well, that's a kid, all he could talk about is, 'in Morocco. In Morocco this, in Morocco that.' So that's how he got that nickname, 'Morocco.' See?"

Interviewer 1: "He was an Arabian?"

Towns: "An Arabian. That's right."

Interviewer 1: "What did the Arabians do down there, West Oakland?"

Towns: "Some of them had stores, they were merchants."

Interviewer 1: "Really? What kind of [stores]. Clothing, or-"

Towns: "They sold goods, sort of haberdashery like. Oh and sheets and pillow cases and things like that. And I was trying to think of a fella's name, Shaheen ... I can't think of Charley's name there. But one day, a fella came into the firehouse: there were all of us blacks in this firehouse and this guy thought this guy was just being funny one day he come in. He says, 'Hey, is Sugar Doughnuts here.' He says, 'We've got nobody here by the name of 'Sugar Doughnuts.' 'Oh yeah, he was on the rig yesterday.' He said, 'Well if he was on the rig yesterday, he'll be here tomorrow [pronounced 'tomorra']. See, because we worked 24 [hours] on and 24 off.

So at roll call that morning they says 'Is Sugar Doughnuts here?' And I said, 'Well I'm George Washington Sugar Doughnuts' [laughs]. He says, 'Well there's a guy in here looking for you yesterday.' I said, 'It must have been 'Spicer.' Well it was Spicer looking for me. They call me 'Sugar Doughnuts' because those days we didn't have a bakery down in our section of town, where we lived. But the grocery store used to get the doughnuts and things in the morning. And I used to be the first one there to get the sugar doughnuts. So they called me 'George Washington Sugar Doughnuts' because I was the first [one there]. [Slight laugh]. But Pete _____ was a Portugee, Al Batz [?] was Portugee; most of its Irish, and a black Irishman at that. He was one of the blacker boys from [slips into a brogue] from back in Northern Ireland. And he had a <u>brooooogue</u> a mile long! [Laughs]. And Zeebeke, 'Portugee Beans.' This guys was always talking about Portugee beans. 'Gimethat': Gimethat, Gimethat, Gimethat! And Crumb, Youz [Youz guys, youz guys, youz guys]. And Honey, Dynamite, Biscuits. When Biscuits died, they never did know what his last name was. Everybody called him 'Biscuits.' And Stump, Reptile, Dippity-Dags, Memphis-Sah, Fleas, Ray-Ray. Well Ray was Raymond Cosey, he was a little French boy. And Dodo was Irish, Zado was a Portugee; no, one of those Hispano-Americans. He come from one of those countries in South

America, I don't remember which one. Leatherhead, Meow-Face: I think he had a face like a cat. And George Reckelberg, put that down. George Reckelberg, Alameda."

Pamela Morton: "How do you spell his last name?"

Towns: "R-E-C-K-E-L-B-E-R-G."

Morton: "He's in Alameda now?"

Towns: "Yeah, he's the only Reckelberg in the phone book. You talk to him: his mother ... worked for the Century Club down there, that same thing but this was in later years. And he could tell you a lot about that. And then Meow-face and Cat face, and Stuie, Cut-face (fella had a cut across his face). And Babe, Normie (Norman), Ted (Teddie) Foots, Midnight (was a colored fella down there, was very very black). And-"

Morton: "But that's sort of an affectionate term, isn't it?"

Towns: "Yeah-"

Morton: "It wasn't like that-"

Towns: "Yeah, and there was another colored fella down there. And then Paulie, Alabalala (Portugee), Applehead; Applehead was in the fire department. His name was very apropos in those days, it never did change. Buckles, Tinker McCann, Balloon-head, Toots and Goldie (brothers), Lucky, Morocco, Rabbits; Johnny Roberts, that's what they used to call him, 'Rabbits.' Because you asked him what his name was... Shy Red, Kicky, Bocce, [?], Carrots, Big Foot. Bullhead. It's all kind [of names]. Back there, in my estimation, would make something very nice for your group. [He is undoubtedly referring to the group's planned reception and exhibition.] Because old-time people coming in, look at this: look at that, Kanaka!"

Morton: "Portuguese?"

Towns: "Put down Hawaiian Islands, yes."

Morton: "Hawaiian, yeah. Yeah, I saw 'Honolulu' and 'Swede.'"

Towns: "Swede yeah, Cutchie. And Ibane was a Swede. But they weren't derogatory terms, they were loving terms that you called a fella. I went into Mother's Cookie, they had a place down there at 5th and Adeline. And we used to go swimming down at the estuary a lot. And so I went in there one day and I saw these Portugee boys from West Oakland, you know. Say [I said] 'Hey *Costa!*' You know, basic Portuguese

things that you pick up down there, you learned. They never talked English, those guys. So this fella come in, he had an impediment of the throat, he's born without a palette or something, and his conversation [he mumbles]. So he came in, and I says 'Ee-ah!' Boy, I got the coldest shoulder you ever saw in your life. [Slight laugh] He just ignored me. So I told the fellas, I says, 'You tell Ee-ah that I didn't mean that derogatorily. I said that as a loving gesture. If he mistook it, it's his hard luck.'

But one day when I was in the fire department we had a fire out on Wood Street. And this little fella come up and he said 'Hey midnight! [And then Towns mumbles incoherently: "That's not your regular fire engine"] I said, 'No, it's not.' And I says, 'How do you know, it's not my regular fire engine?' He said [response is purposely garbled]. I say, 'Was your father's name Johnny?' He says, 'Yeah, ...my Pa was named Johnny.' His father before, his mother evidently married again. And he was born with that same impediment of speech. But of course today, that would have been overcome....

So when I look at this thing here [the list of nicknames] Hump-dididdy: Humpdididdy was a man who used to sell tamales, a colored fella who used to make tamales. And it'd be nobody in sight and he'd be coming down the street, he'd say 'This is Humpdididdy, don't crowd me folks [laughs hard]. Get your tamales here.' See? There's nobody in sight, you know? But that was just his way. But he made good---Goggley-gee was a man, I guess we would say that Goggley-gee wore cataract glasses. He's a very intelligent man but to look at him he didn't look like he had any sense. And then Sore Eye, you know you always have a kid that has a sore eye? Willy Ha Ha, Hot Cakes, Rupee, Big Nose, Manny, Wicky, Sewer, By George---'By George such a such a thing. By George this is so, By George, so and so.... Any time he would stop and talk with you, 'By George, I think we'll go downtown. By George, that's a nice colored thing you got on. ... Oh, when you go through this, it brings back the days when you were a kid. And I was telling Miss Pam here, that those days ... the only people that you knew in the community, were those that had kids. Cause you ran around with the kids and you knew that she was Mrs. So-and-so or Mrs. Samuels .... And that was the thing.

[He refers to an article written by Walter Johnson, "Let's Take a Walk." Apparently the author walks through West Oakland, beginning at 16th Street, the John Irish home. He has another article, "Remembrances," by Bill Oldimat, a Policeman who attended St. Patrick's. Mr. Towns also has several West Oakland fight cards. He also reads a portion from an article from the Oakland Tribune, June 29th, 1913 which refers to Mr. Towns winning a second in a 50 yard event. He refers to a Johnny Asanovitch.]

Interviewer 1: "Would you repeat what you said about Asanovitch changing his name to Anthony?"

Towns: "Well I don't like to say these things because he actually changed his name. Because Asanovich---any foreigner that had names [that sounded foreign] were ostracized because of that."

Morton: "...what did you say before ... just in general. You said people changed very often down there-"

Towns: "Yeah, yeah, but there are many that changed their names down there. I know a fella, his name is Charlie Silva. Charlie went into a lodge one night and Alfa [?] Costa, one of the boys I showed you in the pictures, said 'Hello Charlie Silva! How you doing!' He says, 'My name is 'Forest, my name is Forest.' Well, *Silva* and forest are the same. Silva ... that's forest in Spanish and Portuguese, and Silva, so he changed his name to Forest. And then I knew another fella, he worked for the Southern Pacific for years, and his name was Markovitch. He took examination after examination, he didn't pass! So he knocked the 'vitch' off of his name, and he just used Marco. Next examination he topped the list!"

Morton: "The main point that you made is that there was discrimination."

Towns: "That's right. There's lots of those---oh even some of them Irish names down there changed, the guys changed their names."

Morton: "We heard also that black fighters taking Irish names, isn't that it?"

Interviewer 1: "Well even Italian fighters---well the Irish names seemed to be names that were identified with the big fighters. So I think a lot of people took on those names. Have you heard that?"

Towns: "Well, I know maybe twenty, thirty of them that changed their names down there. Because they didn't have a chance, see? Because they figured that, well they'd take an examination some place, when the application got there they see'd the name was Scazafa or something like that, they'd pull it and throw it aside. And then they'd take the Americanized name. That went on for a long time. I was on the committee that went back to Washington to work against discrimination against ethnic groups, for the International Association of Firefighters. They paid my way. I could have had the job in Washington if I wanted to live in Washington. But I didn't want to live in Washington. But I went there and I set up a program. And these various things

we accused the Civil Service for it, of using their own judgement on those things. Whereas if they left those things alone, these men would get in there, they had the abilities. As a result, we got Chinese, Japanese, every other thing in the fire department.

I meant to bring that program down here for you, that I had when I had a school here; it was published in Chinese. This doctor down in Chinatown, ... he and I worked on it. The Chinese looked at the fire department job as not necessary evil: 'We're not interested in the Fire Department.' I said, 'Maybe you're not interested in the fire department, but that fire department pays from two to three hundred dollars a month.' That was those days. ...they're getting pretty good salaries today.

Anyway, I helped them set up this program, back there in Washington, and then I had to take an examination against fellas that was my Chief! And I was on the Fire Department ten years. But this year they were looking for ability and not for color. And they picked me for that."

Morton: "That's how you got in? I was going to ask you how you got in."

Towns: "Yeah, yeah."

Morton: "It just happened to be one year, you applied at the right time?"

Towns: "Well I didn't know I knew the right thing [?]. Course, in order for me to get an officer's job in the Fire Department, I had to make a survey [pronounced sur-vey, accent on second syllable] of the blacks in the Fire Department. I went back to the days of George Washington. I had a picture of George Washington, the father of our country, fire man is there, posing with his helmet on, right behind him is John Q. Sambo, a black man. That goes back to 1700, 1700 somewhere."

Morton: "What is it, you showed these photographs [sic]-"

Towns: "No, no, no, no. Just made up this survey. And it was done by fellas that had never seen each other. One fella in Baltimore, one in Plymouth and one in Detroit. ...I was appointed to Chief's Operator in 1941. And it appeared in some of the black papers in the East. And these fellas wrote me congratulatory letters and so we become pen pals. Then [one] says Well I heard there's a fire company here, I heard there's a fire company there. So, before you know it, we got all these figures together. So then I had a friend up on the Civil Service Board, one girl that was very friendly toward me, 'cause the rest of the Civil Service Board, they didn't care nothing about me. But this girl

said, 'Oh yes, there's black officers in other places, and we ought to have them here.' So I got a promotion."

Morton: "So that's how you got your promotion, was through research work?"

Towns: "Yeah, I had to survey, in order to get that. Sure. I had to convince them. I was the last black appointed in the Fire Department for fifteen years. I was a rookie for fifteen years. They never hired another one, after that."

Morton: "What year was that?"

Towns: "That was 1927."

Morton: ""So right before the Depression?"

Towns: "It was just before the Depression."

Morton: "Yeah, so that was probably part of it then to, jobs got harder to get."

Towns: "Well no, there was always some place, there was always use for firemen. In fact, my heart bleeds when I see them cutting out these different fellas. Here's a name 'Bubblerod' [?] No those are Arabians. [He list a series of clearly ethnic surnames. He notes an incident where one side of a family changed their name, the other didn't: Barbara versus Barbaca.]

Morton: "I have a question for you: which groups do you remember specifically working for the railroad, and do you remember different groups doing different jobs?"

Towns: "Well a lot of the fellas that went to St. Joseph's Institute got jobs with the Southern Pacific as brakemen, or switchmen, engineers, firemen. Father Mac looked after them. In fact, they helped them in the police department and everything else. Now this Jim Flynn died, he was an inspector, retired inspector. And before he died, my brother died just previously, and he said 'I see your brother Bill died.' I says 'Yeah. ... he's buried the day after tomorrow ... and the funeral's private.' And he says, 'It's not private for me! [laughs].' Because Bill got me the job, Bill took me to Father Mac [laughs]. See? It just goes to show you how they worked, those days. [He apparently refers to some letters and pictures in his collection. He has a list of the girls' names from West Oakland... are these nicknames? They find the name of Bernice Rydman, a woman also interviewed during this project. Apparently Mr. Towns helped put together several reunions of West Oakland oldtimers. There are letters and testimonies from some of these people. One person wrote about the history of St. Patrick's, Father O'Brien, Father

Higgins, Father Dempsey, Father Hayes.... There was also a Father Houlihan. The Oakland Neighborhood History Project staff make arrangements to borrow and copy some of this material. Mr. Towns shows off a picture of his granddaughter. Mr. Town and the interviewers look through old photographs that were apparently used for one of the reunions. He refers to a Joey Oaks, who was a prominent cartoonist from New York. Towns shows interviewer several cartoons by Oaks.]

Towns: "Now you spoke about the West-of-Market Street Boys. I've got three or four copies of their magazine they put out, in here."

Morton: "Did you get along with any of them, or—"

Towns: "Oh, we never had no argument."

Morton: "They just excluded you."

Towns: "That's all, they excluded me. I went to one of their affairs. They had Firemen's Night, they couldn't kick me out, being a fireman. So I went there and I had a speech all ready for them. But they just said, 'Take a bow.' And I took a bow. So Joe Casin was County Clerk... well Joe carried me around when I was a baby. And I was telling him about it. Joe said, 'What was you going to tell them, Royal?' Well I was going to tell them about the day I was born [slight laugh]. I says, 'You know those days, we never went to hospitals. We were [born] there at home. And I heard them calling all these different names, like Mrs. Silva and Mrs. Morerro and oh, German names, everything else. I says, Geez, where is this place? [Someone] says, This is West Oakland. Well Geez, West Oakland must be heaven. And yes I says, West Oakland was heaven. But you guys missed the boat when you put on your applications, 'For White only.' Because there was so much intermixing down there...."

Morton: "Is that where they drew the line: they didn't allow any Asians or—"

Towns" "No, they wouldn't let any Asians or any Europeans! Nobody—"

Morton: "No foreign-born, yeah, no foreign-born."

Towns: "You had to be native-born."

Interviewer 1: "So what were they, sort of Methodists and Presbyterians and [slight laugh]—"

Towns: "No, I don't know what they were. I don't know, they just had that old West Oakland, West-of-Market-Street Boys."

Morton: "When was that founded, do you know? West-of-Market-Street Boys?" [The group briefly discusses this: Town remembers circa 1946. Morton thinks that they put out publications in the 30s.]

Towns: "But Eddie, Eddie Halley was a Captain in the Fire Department and he used always, because he knew my interest in West Oakland, and many times, he and Walter Johnson and them other guys would come to me to find out about West Oakland, you know?"

Morton: "And Mr. Towns, you told me last time that some of the members of the West-of-Market Boys Club were also members of your group."

Towns: "Oh yes, yes, oh yes, oh yes. Lots of them were members of our group too. Ours was just a group of fellas that got together and decided that we were going to give something to bring the old [neighborhood] together. We never had any formal meetings, other than the business meetings that we had."

Morton:: "So it was purely a social club?"

Towns: "That's right,, that's right, that's right."

Morton: "Did the West-of-Market Boys Club have a slightly different purpose?"

Towns: "Yes, they had an organization. They had meeting nights and everything else like that. ...I was just telling you, I was invited to one of their meetings."

Morton: "Uh-hmm. Were they more than a social club?"

Towns: "No, they weren't any more than a social club. They were a lot of business men, in town that belonged to it. [He shows pictures, 'scenes' from West Oakland Old-timers Reunions.] There's every nationality imaginable that you could have in there. And of course, one of the fellas said to me says, I said 'Why didn't you come to the West Oakland Old-timers [Reunion]?' 'No,' he said, 'You always wanted to be Portugee or some other damn thing.. And we thought it was just that.' And I said, 'No!' I said, 'the reason I gave it was because we wanted to give the recognition due to the group in West Oakland, as they were.' See? But that's some of my own kind, that didn't want to come [slight laugh]. See?"

Morton: "I also notice that there was the night the Boys Club had special events like Slavonic nights. That must have been an attempt on their part to bring-"

Towns: "A special what?"

Morton: "A special event called 'Slavonic Night'?"

Towns: "Oh yes, yes, yes. They had ... different groups there. But the boys that belonged to the club: they could belong to the club but their fathers and mothers couldn't belong to to. So there's lots of Slavs down there."

Morton: "You mean, if they were born here."

Towns: "If they were born here."

Morton: "Oh! I see, I see."

Towns: "Yeah, you had to be native-born. [He shows interviewers additional historic photographs including pictures of Johnny Roberts and Joey Oaks. Roberts was a printer in town.] And Joey Oaks, when he came here, there was only certain guys that he wanted to see.... And he reached up and he grabbed me and he hugged me. Boy, I never received any of that from my fondest girlfriends! I don't think my wife even grabbed me like that. He was so glad to see me. And gee whiz, it was funny how we were raised in those days. [He talks about eulogy for Johnny Roberts' funeral, which he wrote. Apparently it was Roberts and Towns who started the idea of West Oakland reunions. The eulogy was the only piece read at the memorial service. Any funds left over from these reunion dinners was donated to charities in West Oakland, e.g. St. Patrick's and St. Joseph's Institute. He shows off a letter in Korean which he had interpreted.]

[He apparently has a picture of a boarding house, The American House, also pictures of the estuary, Goat Island and "Hot Waters."]

Morton: "Hot waters? Where were they?"

Towns: "Well the hot waters was a place---you see, the Key Route used to furnish their own electricity. And they had to have an ample supply of water to wash those boilers out. And they wash those boilers out and that hot water would come right there in a part, well, it would be about 34th and Wood Street. And the Santa Fe had a trestle over there, see that's the Santa Fe trestle there. And we would go swimming in there. This here is Moore Shipyard ... in background; [here] is Tom Mulkey and a bunch of us kids down there. That's Moore's in the background there. [He reads a note from a former buddy.]

Morton: "What did you say this was on 7th Street?"

Towns: "The American House. The American House, 7th and Wood; it ran almost that whole block there."

Morton: "What was it?"

Towns: "It was a rooming house-"

Morton: "Rooming house?"

Towns: "Yeah, where a lot of the railroad men stayed there, worked for the Southern Pacific Company. [He notes that they got information about West Oakland history and whereabouts of old-timers by writing to anyone they knew, who had roots in the community. He reads one of the responses, regarding the names on a Prescott School 1919 February [mid-term] graduation ribbon. G.E. Mortensen was the Principal. The teachers are listed, all of them are "Miss." Kids in the class included Georgie _____, an "Arabian." George Chin (Chinese), John Wall (Portuguese), Herman Brillian (?) (Portuguese), Lavinia Maro, Sylvan, Powell, Barbica (Slovonian).] But yeah, you see, that's how we got that information.... [The letter with this information was written in 1956. The group looks through newspaper articles which Mr. Towns has saved. Royal is referred to as a "great historian" by one writer. Apparently Mr. Towns was a competitive swimmer of some merit.]

Morton: "But tell me about the 1915 Pan-Pacific Exposition. I understand that a lot of blacks from Oakland had put on some sort of exhibition or had participated in the fair. Do you know anything about that?"

Towns: "Well I don't know. [He apparently participated in activities sponsored by Oakland Parks and Rec., "Playground Department." The interviewer makes arrangements to borrow Mr. Towns papers.]

End of informal interview

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